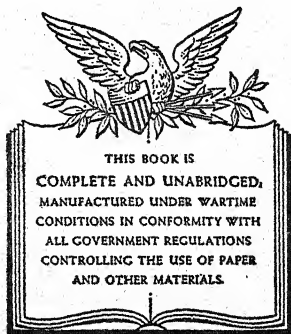


WHEN BILL KENNEDY, broke and unemployed, came to Seattle in 1937, he met Rocky Flynn, a likable prospector with a shady proposition to offer: Bill as a mining expert was to fly to a remote northern gold mine with Ruth McRae, to whom Rocky had sold an interest in the mine, and pronounce it worthless so that Miss McRae would relinquish her claim. Bill would not have taken the job if his worst enemy hadn't been mysteriously murdered and the police hadn't been looking for Bill. The airplane was the only means of escape. Bill and Ruth flew with Rocky to the frozen mine, and there a series of thrilling adventures began. Ruth and Bill found themselves stranded without food and without any hope of escape. Bill found himself in love with the girl he had involuntarily helped to cheat. It seemed impossible that they could ever reach civilization again. How they did it is the theme of one of Robert Ormond Case's swiftest stories, with concentrated action and suspense in every line up to the smash ending.

This story was serialized under the title Rocky Mountain.



WHITE VICTORY



BOOKS BY

Robert Ormond Case

WHITE VICTORY

WEST OF BARTER RIVER

GOLDEN PORTAGE

WINGS NORTH

WHISPERING VALLEY

THE YUKON DRIVE

RIDERS OF THE RIO GRANDE

RONDE

Robert Ormond Case

WHITE VICTORY



1943

210

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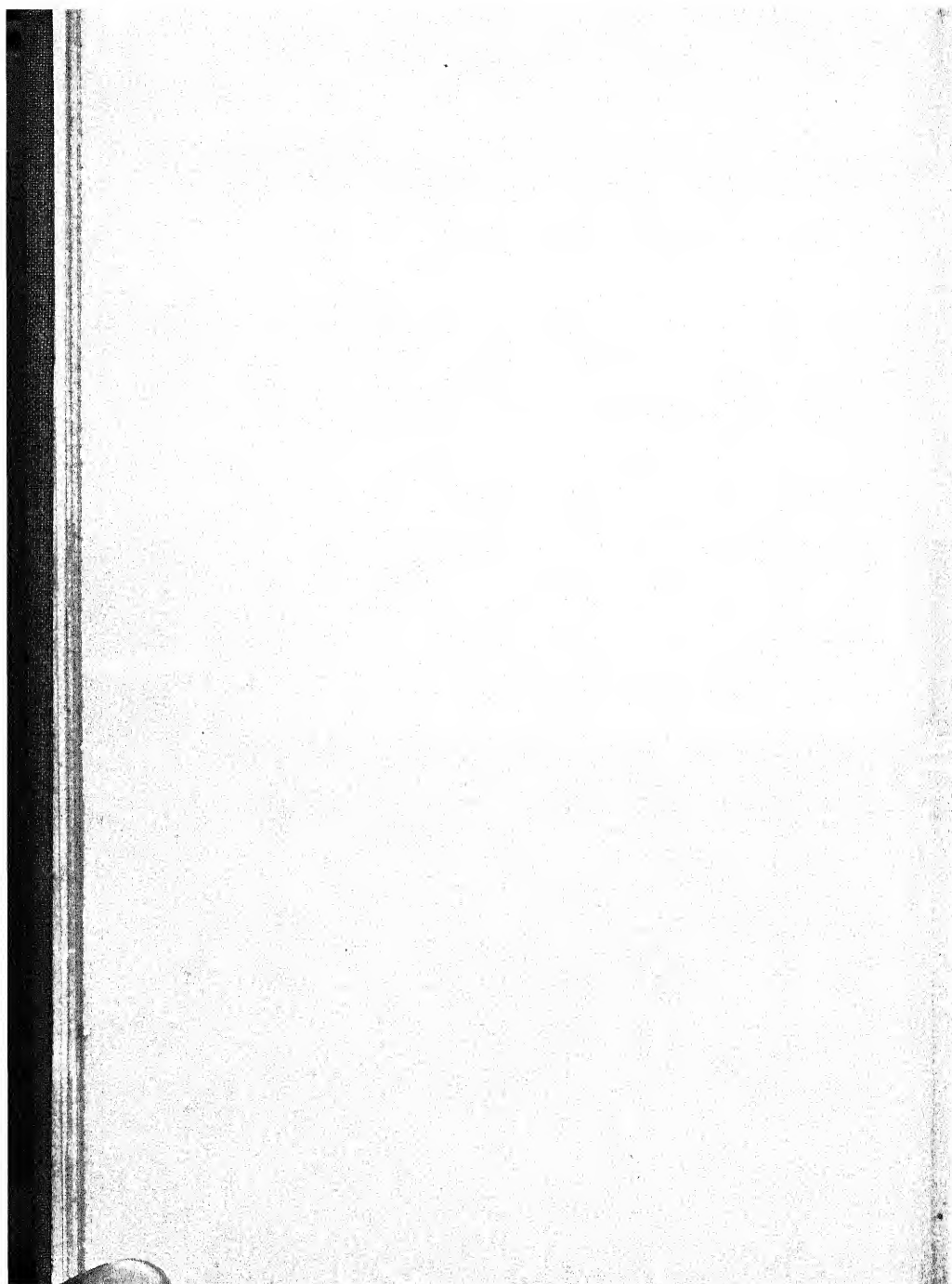
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FIRST EDITION

WHITE VICTORY



CHAPTER I

THOUGH the "recession" was in full swing in Seattle that fall, following the '37 peak, the massive lobby of the Denby was crowded. Bill Kennedy saw why as he followed the baggage-festooned bellboy toward the desk, his hat pulled low over his haggard eyes. Twin banners announced that two exceedingly diverse conventions—Western Cattlemen and Northwest Teachers—had lit here for the week end. Chattering and booming delegates were everywhere.

Bill was thankful for these wheeling mobs. They afforded cover through which he could steal unobserved. The Denby was the favorite rendezvous for the hard-rock and placer fraternity of the Northwest, and old-timers had a habit of lurking among the palms and pillars like wolves in a thicket, hungry for the sight of a familiar face. Always before it had brought a thrill of pride when one of these rickety lobos would pounce out upon him, fangs bared for the conversational kill. "Hold on there—ain't you Hod Kennedy's young one?

Reg'lar block off the old chip, ain't you? How's Hod making out over to Sumpter Valley? . . . Well, sir, I knew your dad clean back to the Klondike. There was a stalwart citizen, in any language! I remember once, up on the Stewart . . ."

And so on and on. Bill wanted none of that tonight. Hod Kennedy's funeral was less than forty-eight hours old, and the blow had been too savage, his wounds too deep, even for the completely honest sympathy of these ancient battlers of the line. A hundred plans, a thousand father-and-son associations had been buried on that wind-swept ridge above Sumpter Valley.

Moreover, news traveled fast via the mining grapevine. Here at the Denby, and in remote camps from the Coeur d'Alenes to the Seward Peninsula, the thing that had broken Hod Kennedy and brought him prematurely to the grave would be known and profanely discussed. The unforgiving old-timers would be muttering over it now. Red Schafer had stolen Hod's string of A-1 claims over there at Sumpter. His manner of doing it had been similar to sneaking up on Hod with a splitting ax. How come, they would want to know, that Red Schafer was still running at large, unremorseful and fancy-free?

Bill had already found the answer in his own turmoil of thought: an apathetic "the hell with it." To run Schafer down and take him apart physically would not change the record, savagely delightful as the chore might be. It couldn't bring Hod Kennedy back. It

couldn't recover the claims. Hod himself had said, in their last hour together—and Bill had decided to follow it through: "Forget it, son. I've made big money betting on men. On Red I lost. Just call it the luck of the draw and go on from there."

A familiar face beamed at the desk: Sam Packard's. Sam was fat, smooth-cheeked, and jovial and the assistant manager of the Denby. He and Bill had been classmates and members of the same tong at Washington.

"Hi, Bill!" He gripped Bill's hand and looked keenly into his face. "Sorry about your dad."

Bill nodded. "Got a room for me?"

"Always, m'lad. The best in the city." He offered a cigarette and Bill took it, leaning there for comfort. He could talk to Sam.

"What are your plans, Bill?"

"I haven't any. Start scouting around Monday, I guess." This was Saturday night. "I'm starting from scratch."

"Look," Sam said. "What kind of a deal did Red Schafer pull up there? These old boys have been pestering me."

Bill winced. "I'll tell you about it sometime. . . . No, they might as well have it straight. Listen."

He explained Schafer's shell game briefly. Schafer had been on his father's pay roll for years. He, Bill, had never liked Schafer, had warned his father against him. This summer, while Bill had been up on the dredges at

Dawson, had come the pay-off. Hod had acquired a touch of bronchitis and had been over at Hot Lake, baking it out. Schafer had brought over a lot of routine papers to sign—receipts and what not. Included was a transfer of title, to Schafer, of Claim Number Twelve.

Hod had promised Schafer Number Twelve as a five-year bonus. He had been feeling low that day and had given the transfer the merest glance. The intern and male nurse who had witnessed the transfer knew nothing about claim descriptions and the like.

Weeks later, hearing nothing from Schafer, Hod had gone out to the creek. An Intermountain dredge was already there, digging in. They had purchased the whole creek from Schafer for cash. All titles were recorded and legal. Hod had transferred *all* the claims to Schafer—and Schafer was gone.

"You're letting him get away with it?" Sam demanded, his plump face flushed with loyal rage. "How come, fella?"

Bill explained how come. Intent to defraud was hard to prove. Intermountain had bought in good faith and were prepared to defend their title up to the Supreme Court, if necessary. It was Schafer's word against Hod's. Hod Kennedy could not now be called to the witness stand.

"I may cross Red's trail somewhere," Bill concluded, his lips thin. "I won't look for him. Monday I'm looking for a job." He got out his wallet, extracted two hundred and fifty in currency, and slid it across the desk.

"Salt this for me, Sam. It leaves fifty for a little relaxation. As a starter, where do I get a good steak?"

"One block up the avenue, two south. Jake's Place." Sam eyed Bill doubtfully. "I dunno, son. In the shape you're in——"

"Thanks," Bill said. "Are they still running a dice game over at De Silva's?"

Sam sighed. "Yeah. Call me if you get in a jam."

The clerk coughed apologetically. "Here's a note for you, Mr. Kennedy. The gentleman left it this morning. He's been in several times."

Bill opened the note and read the all but illegible signature first. A twinkle warmed his bleak eyes as he deciphered the main body of the message.

BILL KENNEDY:

I read about Hod in the paper up at Prince Rupert, so I flew right down. (I mean flew—I travel in style nowadays. A little cabin ship that cost me twenty grand, with a pilot throwed in. Good pilot.) Aimed to see you at the funeral but got grounded here by the blasted fog. Phoned Sumpter Valley and they said you'd be at a hovel called the Denby. I'm at the Malvern, a plenty swank roost. Call me here. I'm on a deal in which there's a big edge for the house, and I'm cutting you in. Your dad done me a good turn once, up to Birch Creek in '96, and at this late date I'm paying off. Call me without fail.

Yours truly,

J. H. FLYNN

Bill showed the note to Sam. "Read that, Sam. Then tell me what you deduce about the gentleman known as Rocky Flynn."

Sam read it, and his first reaction was professional pique. "Hovel?" he said, scandalized. "And him staying at that gilded bat roost? Sounds good, Bill. A prosperous old sourdough raring to do you a good turn." He passed the note back. "Looks like your luck's changed, son. Better ride it."

Bill smiled outright for the first time in days. "Which shows how Rocky manages to struggle along in this vale of tears. He's the crookedest snake that ever crawled from under a forked stick, Sam. And the most plausible. D'ye know what that episode was up at Birch Creek? They'd decided to hang him. Dad talked them out of it. The reason he isn't registered here is because he knew some old-timer would recognize him—and probably shoot him on sight."

"He did sort of sidle up to the desk," the clerk recalled. "There'd be a crowd here, then they'd thin out, and there he'd be. A little, unobtrusive sort of a man. But tough."

"That's him," said Bill. "That's old Rocky. Good men die like flies around him, and there he is. It makes you wonder why." He thrust the note into his pocket, his face darkening. "Well, I'll get along to the room. If Rocky pops up again tell him I just left."

"You aren't even going to call him?" Sam accused.

"He flew all the way down from Prince Rupert to see you."

"All the way," Bill agreed. "Sure, I'll call him tomorrow. Monday, maybe."

He followed the bellboy to the elevator, which was filling up fast. A bevy of schoolteachers huddled in the rear like suspicious quail. Bulky cattlemen crowded in after Bill, genial and red-faced, surrounded by an aroma of cigars and hard liquor. At the last moment a little man dashed in from the shadow of an adjacent pillar and wedged himself among the bulging paunches of the front rank.

"Sorry, sir. This car's full."

"I'll pull in my stummick," said the newcomer, his voice husky and ingratiating. "Let 'er ramble, son."

As the elevator shot skyward Bill peered down over the broad shoulders ahead of him, scowling. The little man was wearing a battered black hat in whose flat crown an ancient trout hook was embedded. Below its lowered brim was a segment of leathery cheek, bulging with an enormous chew, and a faded mustache that drooped down to a craglike, truculent jaw.

Bill relaxed, shrugging. It was too late now to run for it. He had seen Rocky Flynn only once before, and that was eight years ago, but he was the type that stands apart for no apparent reason in the faceless crowds of memory. *Might as well get it over with*, he thought. *Listen to him, then brush him off gently. After all, he knew Dad.*

CHAPTER II

AT THE SEVENTH FLOOR the little man stepped off first and stood aside. Bill followed the bellboy out and spoke casually, motioning up the hall. "Come on along, Rocky. Never mind the sleuth act. How's tricks?"

Rocky did not start, though taken by surprise. He fell in step, peering up into Bill's face, his eyes pale blue and deceptively mild under shaggy brows.

"As a sleuth," he stated, "I'm a danged good blacksmith. I knew you right off on account of Hod. How in tunket did you know me?"

"You forget Telegraph Creek," Bill said. "I was there with Dad that summer. You were panhandling down by the freight sheds."

Rocky hunched his shoulders. "I would bring up that depressing interlood. Yeah, that camp didn't do right by me. I finally quit 'em. Which is plenty in the past now, boy. Way back and down. You got my note?"

Bill nodded. "We'll discuss it—fast."

"Don't you get socially entangled," Rocky warned.

"Nor start blazing trails." Again his bleached eyes studied Bill's face. "I know what ails you, son. When I read about Hod I busted down and howled like a wolf. And came a-running. I heard about Red Schafer's deal. I know you're broke and down in the mouth, but don't you be that way any more, Bill, on account I'm sitting in. Which means it's daylight in the swamps. Whichever way you go from here, it gets better."

"Sounds good," said Bill with a gloomy twinkle.

You couldn't help warming to old Rocky Flynn; he was a decrepit wolf in sheep's clothing. He wore a mask of homely virtue through which he peered humorously, unabashed. And he was not too decrepit, at that, Bill saw. He was short but broad, with long arms and battle-scarred knuckles. He was certainly past sixty years, having seen Chilkoot and the roaring Klondike, yet age had touched him lightly. He walked with a solid, rolling gait, and much daylight showed between his stocky knees.

The room was large and cheerful. The bellboy planted the baggage and put up the shades. Bill tipped him. "Anything else, sir?"

"No."

"Yeah," said Rocky. From his right hip pocket he produced a flat flask, which he placed on the table. From the left pocket he took out a substantial roll of bills and peeled off the top one carelessly. "Rustle up some glasses and some of that there fizz water, son. Keep the change."

Bill started to protest, then waved the boy on. After all, there was plenty of time.

"Make yourself comfortable," he told Rocky, tossing his trench coat on the bed. "I'll freshen up a little."

As he combed his hair meticulously in the glittering bathroom his reflection peered back at him—lean-jawed, somber. He looked trim and athletic in leather jacket, whipcord breeches, and high-laced pacs. It was the same outfit in which he had flown down from Dawson when word had come out to the dredges that Hod Kennedy had less than forty-eight hours to live. He debated changing, then decided against it. He wouldn't be going to any of the uptown dives—just Jake's Place, which shouldn't be swanky. And De Silva's, where no holds were barred.

When he came out the bellboy had come and gone, and Rocky had two stiff drinks poured. Rocky was waiting politely, perched on the edge of the easy chair. Bill took up a glass and sniffed it. "Hm-m. Hudson's Bay?" It was the favorite of old-timers of a generation before, the potent "squareface" of Yukon camps. "You drink that stuff straight?"

"Pollute yours with fizz water if you've a mind to," Rocky invited. "I like to feel her hit."

Bill nodded. "I'll try it once, this being an occasion. Here's how."

"Wait," said Rocky.

He came to his feet, took off his hat, and stood erect. The act touched him with dignity and force. Above his

pugnacious nose, which was pitted and blue from ancient frostbite, his forehead and thinning thatch of hair were interlaced with many scars. Bill recalled that his father had conceded one sterling virtue to Rocky, a touch of pure metal buried dark and deep: when the bluffing was over and the free-for-all began, Rocky would be there.

"Most folks have plenty friends, Bill," he said. "I had one. . . . Let's drink to Hod."

Bill studied his glass unseeingly for a moment. Why not? In this moment—it was one of the few—Rocky was sincere. He said: "To James MacGregor Kennedy. A gentleman who accepted his winnings without boasting, his losses without complaint. And met his final showdown with dignity."

"That's telling it. You got the education, son." Rocky raised his glass, blinking. "Sleep sound, Hod. Where there ain't any frost and the wind don't blow."

They drank, and Bill gasped. The impact of it was searing and well-nigh explosive. "Lawdy!" he breathed. "Great snares and bear traps!"

"It ain't nectar," said Rocky, his mustache curling. "It ain't dew. She hits."

One drink led to another. Bill knew it was a dangerous business on an empty stomach and in his battered emotional state. This embalming fluid was potent. But, on the other hand, why not? A long night and a long life lay ahead. His inner tenseness was relaxing, a lately overwhelming sense of desolation mellowing. His

ordinarily good-natured outlook was getting up from the canvas, groggy but ready for business.

Old Rocky was a card. Talking apparently at random and in the profane or humorous vein the subject demanded, he managed to explore such various fields as Bill's plans for the future, which were non-existent, his opinion on women in business, which was low, and his present feeling toward Red Schafer, who had done Hod Kennedy wrong.

Bill tried to side-step that angle. "Let's hurry by Red Schafer."

"He's in town," Rocky insisted. "I've seen him around." His eyes were bleached and intent. "You mean to say you ain't got some notion, son, the kind that sort of crawls and itches and burns inside of you, but that you'd *want* to meet up with him?"

Bill glanced at his watch, which was blurred a little. "Look—it's after nine. I haven't eaten yet."

That diverted Rocky. "Son of a gun—and I've et hours ago! Let's go. I'll trail along and set with you."

"Sorry," said Bill, not unkindly. "I'm lone-wolfing it tonight. A steak down at Jake's Place, then prowl a little. De Silva's, maybe. That's a gambling dive."

"Don't I know it?" said Rocky sadly. "Leave one puddle in the desert and I fall in it. Middle of the alley, below Jake's Place." That fact seemed to catch his interest. He pondered it, studying Bill without expression. He nodded. "Yeah. . . ."

"What's on your mind, Rocky?" Bill prompted. "You mentioned a deal."

Rocky pulled himself together. "It's cutthroat," he said. "I wouldn't fool you, son—it's a racket. But your part of it's clean—clean as a hound's tooth."

He explained the deal, and Bill recognized it almost from the first word as one of the oldest "phonies" in the mining world. Rocky had organized a stock company to develop an alleged body of ore up above the Finlay River on the west slope of the Rockies. It was on a remote lake, accessible only by airplane.

"Times has changed," Rocky explained with engaging candor. "It used to be we'd dig a hole in a cliff up some hell-roaring creek in which there was boulders as big as hayricks. Too tough a trail for the average pilgrim. Still, if they insisted, there the hole was. Evidence that we'd performed. . . . These airplanes make it a cinch. This lake's so far up in them blasted mountains it even scares me when we fly in."

"But you've actually got a hole there," said Bill, amused.

"Sure we got a hole there. We don't just slug our customers and run. There's a nice big tunnel in the cliff. Tailings spilling down to the lake. It looks more like a mine than a real producer. The lake ain't even on the map, so I named it. Luna Lake."

"Pretty name. Looks good in the moonlight, eh?"

"It's got nothing to do with the moon. Just a touch

of sentiment, believe it or not." Rocky blinked diffidently. "I got a squaw up Fort Nelson way. Rosy-cheeked that-a-way and healthy as a clover. Good trapper and wood splitter. Name of Luna."

Bill grinned. "Why, Rocky!"

"She's insurance," Rocky defended himself. "Some-day when I'm old and broken down and the wolves are closing in, I'll come sneaking in from the brush along the Dease. I may be in rags and limping, but to Luna I'll still be that there knight in shining armor. What was that boiler-plated critter's name? Gallagher?"

"Galahad," said Bill, chuckling. "Okay, Rocky."

It seemed that Rocky had sold stock in the venture to the tune of one hundred and ten thousand dollars. He and his partner, Whitey Bodine, the pilot of the ship, had split this considerable pot and proceeded to the routine business of scuttling the company. This was usually the easiest part of it. Stock assessments—levied to run a new drift in an attempt to pick up the lost vein—usually caused the most stubborn and optimistic shareholder to take to the hills.

But a joker had developed. Rocky had permitted a woman capitalist to buy in—an admittedly gross error in judgment. He couldn't resist it; she'd looked like a female Santa Claus. She had not only put in sixty thousand originally but had anteed another twenty in assessments. Now she couldn't be shaken off.

"It ain't the money," Rocky explained sadly. "She's so filthy prosperous that that eighty grand is peanuts.

It's the principle of the thing. It's like she's bet at the races and her goat comes in last and she's lost face. She aims to get action up there at Luna Lake—or else. She means it. She's tough. She's got that hard-boiled MacRae streak in her."

"MacRae?"

Rocky spread his hands. "That's who she is, Bill. I shut my eyes and shoot at the moon, and that's what I fetch down, feathers and all. The granddaughter of old Alexander MacRae, in person."

Bill whistled. Rocky had certainly aimed high. The MacRaes, in western Canada, had once been as the Rothschilds to the Continent, the house of Morgan to international finance. Old Alec MacRae had built up the towering fortunes of the clan. The socialite third generation, as usual, were industriously scattering the winnings.

"Not Ruth MacRae, by any chance?"

"That's her." Rocky stared at him. "You know her?"

"Not exactly. Not socially, y'know." Bill was surprised at the force of the old smoldering humiliation. Good lord, that was eleven years ago! Kid stuff. "It was at Shawnigan Lake, on Vancouver Island. While Dad was prospecting up above I batched in a cabin on the West Arm. Ruth was staying with her mother in a swank lodge called the Strathcona. I crossed over each day and went swimming with the rest of the young ones on the Strathcona dock. Didn't give it a thought. I was sixteen. Ruth was fourteen. She was plump and

had freckles and wore pigtails. I liked her. I didn't know who she was—or care."

"Until Mamma caught up with you," said Rocky sagely.

"Until Ruth did. We were out canoeing, and I stopped at the shack to get my .22 so I could show her what a fancy shot I was. She was horrified. She said: 'Do you *live* here?' When I said I did, she said: 'Take me back to the dock, quick.' At the dock she said: 'I'm so humiliated. My word—I thought you were one of *us*!' Then she marched off."

"Fawncy that!" said Rocky. His mustache curled. "Yeah. After that there was tufts on your ears and thumbs on your feet."

Bill shrugged. "That's all there was to it. I just didn't go swimming on the Strathcona dock that afternoon. Or ever." He didn't tell Rocky how fresh and undimmed was his memory of Ruth MacRae. Pigtails and freckles . . . Who said that calf love was never eternal? Or that a wound to callow pride healed quickly? *I'm getting drunk*, he thought, draining his glass. It was his fourth—or fifth—and all had hit.

He got up abruptly, and the room wheeled about him. He made his way to the window while Rocky watched him, poker-faced. He pulled down the sash and leaned there, drinking in the raw night air. The late rain had ceased, but a wind from the north still swept down the man-made canyon. Mists were thin-

ning overhead. A few dim stars shone there, and a fragment of pale moon, high in the west.

His head cleared a little, but inner fires were smoldering and spreading. The time had come to brush Rocky off. Unless he ate soon he'd be stiff as a plank.

"Okay, Rocky. Where do you figure me in?"

"For five thousand bucks. For two days' work."

"Too much. To do what?"

Rocky twisted to face him more fully. "Just fly up to Luna Lake with us. Look the hole over and tell her my story's correct—the pay's petered out. Tell her she's lost her eighty grand, and she might as well sign off and call it a day. It's one of the risks of mining."

Bill shook his head, his amusement tinged with annoyance. Rocky certainly had known from the beginning that he would have no part of it. No reputable engineer would.

Still, he was curious. "Why me? Vancouver's full of engineers."

"Sure. And they've all got a grudge against the Mac-Raes. It's one of them traditions in B.C. You're a rank outsider. You're the only name I mentioned that she'd even listen to. She's heard of Hod. She figures you'd be honest. . . .

"Now, wait, son." Rocky got up and did not sway. He went to the window and leaned opposite Bill, studying his face. "You *could* be honest. There the hole is. It's haywire. No engineer living could do more than guess how much capital had been sunk in it. Look, we

take off around midnight. Prince Rupert by sunup. At noon tomorrow we're at Luna Lake. By Wednesday you're back again with five thousand smackers in your jeans. Clean money. Is that a start in life?"

"For somebody," Bill agreed. "Not me." He pushed away from the window and looked at his watch. "Sorry, old son."

Rocky followed him, his ragged mustache quivering. "You won't go for it a-tall?" Act or not, he seemed completely disheartened. "Five thousand bucks just to get her to sign off?"

"Why?" Bill was still curious. "What's it to you whether she signs off or not?"

"Because, doggone it, I gave her control for that last twenty grand. She owns Luna Lake."

"So what? Let her have it. You admit it's worthless."

Rocky spread his hands. "You don't get the picture. She don't want Luna Lake. What she craves now is to see my hide stretched on the fence. With the ears missing. 'Less I satisfy her at once that everything's been on the up and up—pronto, forthwith, by Monday at the latest—she turns the wolves loose. Those Mining Office boys are tough. The Provincial Police wouldn't give no more than six months' pay to see me and Whitey behind bars. That's what I'm up against, Bill."

Bill chuckled outright. Rocky had been smoked out at last. He hadn't come rushing to offer aid but to ask for it. And yet, according to his nature, Rocky looked upon himself as an openhanded benefactor, engaged in

squaring old debts. It would wound him deeply to suggest otherwise.

"Don't you say no, cold turkey," Rocky warned. He backed to the bed, took up his battered hat, and pulled it low over his eyes. "Not a word now until you've et. I hadn't ought to have put it up to you on an empty stummick. I never dreamt——" He broke off, backing toward the door. "I'm still figuring you in, Bill. I've *got* to. . . . I'll see you around. At Jake's, maybe."

"Come along now," Bill invited remorsefully. "It's all right. At least have a shot of coffee with me——"

But Rocky was gone.

Bill stared at the closed door for a moment, scratching his head. Then he shrugged cheerfully, peering about him. That was that. Next on the program was the T-bone at Jake's. . . . He went to the window and looked out. The stars were brighter overhead; the threat of rain was gone. He decided to leave his hat and coat behind. The chill wind would feel good.

CHAPTER III

HE LEFT HIS KEY at the desk and went out into the engulfing traffic. First corner north, Sam had said; two to the left. He quitted the brilliantly lighted avenue and turned into the shadows downhill.

The water front was outspread below. Ten thousand city lights flamed and glittered in a vast crescent along the Sound. The smell of fish and tar and hemp rolled in with the wind. A hint of tide flats was there and a haunting breath from farther kelp-lined shores. This had, Bill saw, the makings of a beautiful night.

He strode on and down, face upturned, weaving and stumbling a little. The hill was steep, and it was growing steeper. When he passed the first intersection, which was level, the next jump-off was incredible. He started down it firmly, nevertheless, and suddenly saw to his horror that the street was tilting downward and inward below him. It was sheer as a wall, and he was falling. He clutched at a lamppost and found it falling too. Very well; so they'd fall together.

"Hang onto it, buddy," advised a passer-by, grinning. "It almost got away from you that time."

"Yes sir," said Bill with dignity. "Thank you, sir." *He means well, he thought benevolently, but he's crazier than a snake. He thought I was drunk.*

He saw that the street was dangerous but passable and went on warily. Jake's Place was below, in the middle of the block. He could make it that far.

He made it and found it jammed with customers. When he saw the long queue of couples and parties waiting there he knew he was done for. He couldn't wait; he was starving. But this was his lucky night. The headwaiter spied him, saw that he was alone, and beckoned him in.

"T-bone," he said with a sigh. He was snugly established in one of the small alcoves that flanked the glittering room. "Hash browns. Never mind the soup. . . . Soup?" He shuddered. "No—no soup."

"Yes sir. Dinner wines?"

"It's an idea," Bill agreed. His thought processes were entirely clear; he knew logic when he saw it. "An excellent idea." He studied the wine list and found some sparkling burgundy, imported stock. "There you are," he said triumphantly. "A bottle."

"Yes sir."

The steak was good. Except that the first three glasses suggested mildly flavored rain water, the burgundy was good. He lighted a cigarette and toyed over it, looking about him. It appeared that Jake's Place was

one of the recent "discoveries" of the uptown crowd. There were dinner jackets and evening cloaks out there. Teeth flashed in the subdued light, and jeweled rings sparkled. These customers were young: the cocktail, late-dinner, and night-club gang.

Bill saw at once that he had started this evening wrong. He was also young. Why was he roosting here, on the edge of things, like a hopeful bull owl blinking at the jungle parade? He knew Seattle. He had been a "big shot" in college days—he grinned at that—an end on a Rose Bowl team, one of the graduates labeled "bound to succeed." Certainly he had lost touch during the past two years, but somewhere in this robust, sprawling city he had dozens of friends.

Dozens? There were scores—hundreds. It was a friendly town. Jack Lanceford, for instance. He'd heard up on the dredges that Jack was getting a crew together for an oil-and-mineral exploration down in Ecuador. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Jack might have a spot for him. You had to sign up for three years on those South American deals, but what of it? It meant experience, a change of scenery, a stake with which to start out again when he returned to the Northwest. It would clear the mental decks.

He emptied his glass and signaled the waiter. He paid his check and prepared to leave. Get back to the hotel, call Jack, start the wheels moving—that was the program.

Then he saw Rocky coming and relaxed, shrugging.

Rocky came directly to the alcove and leaned there, twirling his hat on a stubby forefinger. Bill blinked up at him genially. Rocky was all right. Rocky couldn't help the shape he was in—crooked as a pretzel, prowling the barrens like a vulture. But you couldn't get tough with Rocky.

Rocky's mood had changed during the preceding hour. His hard glance studied Bill and the empty bottle.

"You're swacked," he asserted. "Stiff as a carp."

"Oh no," Bill denied. "No indeed. And if so—what of it? Look, Rocky—about that squareface. 'S awful. It's dynamite. There ought to be a law——"

"Outside, m'lad." Rocky jerked his thumb toward the door. "Let's see you walk. Two gets five you fall flat on your foolish face."

"Done," said Bill.

He rose and led the way. Rocky followed, watching him narrowly. "Not bad," he admitted when they were outside. "Five it is. Now, five more says you can't walk downhill. You soar like an eagle. I don't hold you up, remember."

"Nonsense," said Bill with dignity.

They came to an alley. Rocky guided Bill in, and Bill, peering about him blandly, knew that he had seen this place before. The farther entrance stood out in silhouette against hidden street lights. A hidden moon in the east shone on a brick wall at the left. There was a break in the wall, and some sort of junk yard was inside. On the right towering buildings blotted out the

sky. A row of lighted windows blazed up there on the second floor. Below was the dimly lighted secondhand store that served as a blind for De Silva's.

"Ha!" said Bill, halting. "You're deep, Rocky—deep and dev-il-ish sly. But I'm gonna fool you. I'm not going to De Silva's. Different 'rangements. I'm going back to hotel. I'm gonna call old Jack Lanceford——"

"Listen," said Rocky. "There's a guy at De Silva's who wants to see you. He's waiting for you. Name of Red Schafer."

Bill stared at him, blinking. Then he laid hold on Rocky's arm and was surprised to find Rocky trembling like a bulldog braced against the leash.

"Schafer? Don't you ruin this fine large evening, Rocky."

"Listen, you polluted maverick," said Rocky. It was surprising how tough he could be. "Schafer's looking for you. He heard you was in town. He's just drunk enough to be mean. He's up there making his brag about how he took Hod Kennedy. He's laughing at you with his mouth full of teeth. D'ye know how much he's got left of that twenty grand he stole from Hod? Less than six. Does *that* mean anything to you? Or d'ye still feel like throwing handsprings amongst the Shasta daisies and yodeling at the moon?"

Bill scowled at him, very much annoyed. "Schafer can live his own life, my friend. I'll live mine. D'you know what I think of Schafer?" He snapped his fingers. "The hell with Schafer. Let him fry in his own fat."

"Okay." Rocky tore himself roughly away. "I'll go jump him myself. D'ye think Hod's sleeping sound tonight? He was a friend of mine. You're only his flesh and blood. . . . Roll your hoop elsewhere, son."

He strode away and did not look back.

"Wait," said Bill.

Rocky halted at once. Bill overtook him and passed him, heading for the entrance to De Silva's. Rocky trotted alongside. "Yeah?"

"You're right," Bill said. "There's a chore to be done. Funny how it slipped my mind! . . . His mouth's full of teeth, eh?"

"Look," said Rocky. "There's some short lengths of pipe in that junk yonder. Best slip one in your pocket for percentage. He's mean."

"Tut," Bill reproved. "We're gentlemen, Rocky. Just a little discussion. No brawl."

"Gentlemen!" Rocky whispered. "No brawl, he says. . . . I'm a ring-tailed, stalwart son!" Then, seeing Bill's face in the strengthening light, he hunched his shoulders. "Excuse it, please. . . . Better invite him outside, Bill. Them barkeeps are bouncers also. They'll be giving you the eye."

"Tut," Bill said. "Of course. Preserve the amenities—or do you observe 'em? Always defend one's dignity—mustn't one?"

"Always," Rocky agreed, his mustache spreading.

They mounted up the back stairs, passed the lookout, and so through the upper door. It was a glittering den.

A vast carpet stretched out in green-and-gold splendor to the chromium-trimmed bar. A larger expanse at the right held the gaming tables. Many customers milled there, some in evening dress, others roughly garbed. Smoke hung like fog about the soft lights overhead.

Schafer was leaning at the bar, half facing the door: a big man, lazily alert. He had on a suit of expensive make but poorly fitting. The coat was too tight about his bulging shoulders, too loose about his lean hips. The open collar of a sport shirt flared about his massive neck, and the brim of his upturned hat gave an arrogant, flashy touch to his heavy-jawed features.

"Leave seconds for me," Rocky whispered. "You want me to stand by or fade?"

"Fade," said Bill. Rocky sidled to the right and was gone.

"That's him, Louie," Schafer said. A newly lighted cigarette hung from his lips; it waggled up and down as he spoke to one of the bullet-headed bartenders leaning near by. "One of these lads who don't know how to play for keeps. You've seen 'em around this joint, squalling." He grinned at Bill. "How you doing, son?"

Bill halted and did not sway. His reflection in the mirror back of the bar was that of a formidable stranger—the face bloodless, eyes burning, lips smiling a little. He thought: *Somebody's unchained a wolf.*

"I've gained heft, Red," he said. "Thanks for waiting."

He knew that Red would know what he meant. More than once in his callow boyhood, unknown to Hod Kennedy and before Hod himself had been softened for the kill, he had groveled at this man's feet, the breath battered from his gangling body, the very soul of him wrenched and sick with helpless rage. "You wait, Red Schafer—just you wait! When I grow up . . ."

"Sure." Red had always flavored the dish with contempt. "Get some heft, sonny. I'll wait."

Red recognized it now for what it was, his grin tightening. "The pay-off, eh? Spill it, then. Lay it on the line. You figure I owe you something, maybe?"

"A trifle or two," Bill admitted. "Plus a little interest. You've been writing it on the cuff, you know——"

"No rough stuff, boys," the bartender interposed. He needed no ringside gong to warn him. "Whatever it is, take it outside."

"Of course. Sorry." Bill bowed a little, waving toward the door. "After you, sir."

"No indeed," Schafer returned, winking at Louie. "Proceed, Mr. Kennedy."

Bill led off, every nerve and fiber of him aroused and on guard. Mists had cleared away. No jungle path was more dangerous than this narrow stairway, with Red Schafer behind him. . . . But the lookout was watching from below; he opened the door. "Good night, boys. Come again." They passed through and down. As they crossed the dimly lighted store Bill was watch-

ing their twin reflections in the cobwebbed windows ahead.

He crouched suddenly, shifting his head. Schafer's fist drove by with such force behind it that his underarm and body lunged against Bill's shoulder. Momentarily his arm was extended there, and his clenched fist—hairy, the tendons standing out like iron, the knuckles huge and metallic. Bill grasped that wrist and bowed himself forward and down through the open door.

Schafer's body described an arc; he crashed in the alley on his shoulders and back. Notwithstanding the shattering impact of it, he rolled on and up in a catlike movement. Bill stepped down lightly into the open. "It's a habit with you, Red? I mean—brass knuckles?"

"You asked for it," Schafer returned between his teeth. "Put a rat like Rocky on my trail, will you?—setting the old-timers against me, spreading talk about me stealing your blasted claims."

"Well?" said Bill. "Who stole them?"

"Last chance, sonny." Schafer lowered his shoulders and braced himself. "Run for it—clean out of town. Or I'll mark you."

"Take off those knuckles, Red. After all, we're white men. Or are we?"

Schafer rushed at once, a bull-like charge. Bill ducked under his flailing right, slashed once, and retreated. Schafer's left grazed his temple; another smashed his jaw. He scarcely felt it. He was watching Schafer's

lethal right. One blow from those brass corrugations would tear flesh from bone. *My error, Rocky*, he thought grimly. *Where's that short length of pipe?*

He planned his strategy in retreat. Schafer was stalking him now, crouching. In the dim light the whites of his eyes and his bared teeth glistened. Bill's back was to the wall, and with a muttered, triumphant imprecation Schafer closed, swinging. Bill ducked almost to his knees and placed his right foot against the wall. Thrusting like a piston, he tackled hard and low, mowing his man down.

He was up at once in an explosive effort, wrenching himself free from hands that were master of all the foul arts of bone breaking and gouging. Their positions were now reversed: the alley behind him, the wall behind Schafer. He did not retreat; this was his opening. As Schafer came up, his gorilla arms raising, Bill set himself and swung from the heels.

It had to be good, and it was good: a hay maker. Schafer's head shot back. He was not out as he fell but staggered back and down, trying to catch his balance. He failed and crashed. A tier of stone projected from and supported the base of the wall: designed, in some past epoch, to protect wagon wheels from scraping the brick. The back of Schafer's head struck the projecting edge of granite with a sullen impact. His body sagged down, his chin thrusting forward on his chest. In this position he lay motionless and inert.

Bill stood over him, swaying, battling the most sav-

age of all flaming desires: the urge to crush and destroy utterly. "How about it, Red?" His challenge rang hoarsely through the alley. He stood ready, imagining he could see that dim, massive figure bowing forward a little, gathering itself for an upward, clawing leap.

But Schafer made no reply or movement. Bill stood looking down, his fingers exploring his jaw. The bone was aching, the flesh bruised and moist. He turned away, breathing heavily, and got out his handkerchief to hold against the cut. He paused and looked back, then went on. *Somebody'll stumble over him*, he thought. *Just another bum in an alley*. He looked at his handkerchief and saw dark stains on it. Better get it taped up right away. No use looking like a tramp when he went back to the hotel.

CHAPTER IV

HE TURNED into the first drugstore on the avenue and repaired the damage. The druggist suggested a hot pack to reduce the welt on Bill's forehead. Bill applied the pack at the sink in the back room, his head clearing. Late fires cooled slowly in his blood. He decided to go back to the alley. Red might still be unconscious; he'd hit the wall a considerable jolt. The chore was done, such as it was, but it wasn't right to abandon Red there.

He had been gone from the scene of the late battle a matter of minutes. When he turned into the shadows he found a number of people, a dozen or more, clustered about the spot where Schafer lay. They formed a circle that was illumined in the center. He joined them, touched by a sudden, somber thrill of apprehension.

A policeman was standing by the body, his flashlight tucked under his arm at an angle, so that it shone on a notebook in his hand. He was questioning a tall, bespectacled man, jotting down the answers. Red Schafer had been shifted a little away from the wall, so that

his head rested on the cobblestones. His head was hidden from view, somebody having found his hat and placed it over his face.

"Drunk?" Bill asked the bystander against whom he pressed. He knew better. His knees felt weak.

"Dead as a doornail," the man returned without looking at him. "Somebody slugged him and left him lay. Listen . . ."

The bespectacled man was talking nervously. "I'd just come down from—from——"

"Yeah—De Silva's," said the officer. "This'll padlock that joint. Now just tell it and don't repeat. . . . You found the body here. You phoned headquarters. Ever see this fellow before?"

"Yes sir. Just a few minutes ago—when he left with a young fellow, a tall chap——"

"Ha!" said the officer. "He left with a guy. What else do you remember about this guy? Describe him."

The bespectacled man gulped. "He was tall——"

"Okay, so he was tall. Remember, brother, he's getting farther away by the minute. What color was his hair?"

"Black. And a little curly. A good-looking lad. I noticed him because he walked right up to—to this man——"

"What was he wearing?"

"A leather jacket. And high-topped boots. He wasn't a working man, though—you could tell that——"

Bill edged away, feeling dizzy and nauseated. It

seemed incredible that he could stand there, one of the crowd, and not be recognized. For the moment all were facing in, but if he moved farther away he would instantly attract attention.

He tried to think, but his thought processes had bogged down. Police sirens were screaming along the upper avenue; others were turning down toward the alley. There was something about those banshee wails that made his skin crawl. They seemed to shriek: "Hold him—hold him! Don't let him run for it! We're almost there. . . ."

Why run for it? Facts were facts. The thing to do was step up and say: "We were fighting. I knocked him down and his head hit——" But wait; he, Bill, had come looking for Schafer. He'd forced the issue, invited Schafer out. The bartenders would swear to that. This bespectacled citizen would swear to it. The least possible charge, under such circumstances . . .

It was too late now: an ambulance and police car were swinging into the alley at this end, the patrol wagon and another police car at the other. The alley was blocked. He was trapped.

A hand grasped his arm, and he stiffened. This was it. . . . But it was Rocky Flynn, and Rocky was urging him back, away from the group. "You completely nuts?" he whispered savagely. "I figured you'd shellack him. I never dreamt you'd lay him like a carpet. Why ain't you miles away? Easy, now. Not too fast."

Bill held back. "No use, old son. Might as well face it."

There was a stir at the rear. A voice roared after them peremptorily: "Hey, you! Where are you going?" The officer's flashlight glared. "Come back here! Nobody's leaving this alley."

"Easy," Rocky whispered. "Into this junk yard. There's a board fence at the back. A woodyard below. Don't look back. . . ."

"Halt!" barked the officer, aroused and advancing.

"Now!" Rocky hissed.

They dived through the break, and Rocky twisted immediately to the left, shielding them from possible line of fire. Pounding feet re-echoed; a whistle blasted shrilly. "Watch it!" Rocky warned. "Don't fall amongst these ruins. . . . Here's a hole in the fence."

They dived through and down into the protection of long tiers of cordwood. Vivid flame lanced down from the top of the fence. The sound of the explosion reverberated in the night.

But they were already in the clear. A dark tunnel was below, between two shoddy tenements. They plunged through and out into the street. At Rocky's gesture they turned immediately to the right. "Right again," he directed when they came to the corner. "Just walk casual, smack up past the alley. There'll be crowds there. Them prowling cars will be fanning out, looking for us."

It was just that simple. They passed the north end

of the alley, through the converging crowds, and mounted up to the avenue. The traffic there was a different, unheeding world; they merged into it like trout in a stream. Bill could feel his heart pounding as they moved with the current. None gave them a second glance. They were two among thousands.

"Hold it," said Rocky when they came to the first corner. He steered Bill to the curb. "Look, here's a cab." He flung up his arm.

"Cab?" Bill said, his lips trembling. Every muscle in his body seemed to be trembling. "It's only a couple of blocks to the hotel."

Rocky grunted. "Sure—and a dick probably leaning against the desk there, looking for you." The cab slid up alongside. "In with you."

"But my bags! And I left all my money with Sam
_____"

"Which takes rank," said Rocky severely, "amongst them completely trivial details. I'm well heeled. First thing in a fire is to get in the clear. You can always buy more furniture. . . . Get in, boy."

Bill got in and sat back, eyes closed. Rocky gave a muttered order to the driver. "And step on it." He got in beside Bill, and the cab shot away.

Afterward, looking back, Bill marveled at how grateful he felt toward Rocky. It proved something or other. At the moment he was too washed out for ra-

tional reasoning. He had traveled too fast, too far, during the previous three hours.

He said wearily: "Where to, Rocky?"

"The airport," said Rocky. "We were taking off around midnight, anyway. What you need now is plenty of miles between you and Seattle. So we'll give you a lift to Prince Rupert."

Bill sat up, cringed, and relaxed again. "Prince Rupert? What good will that do?"

"Lay low there first," said Rocky. "Sleep it off. Then figure it out. . . . Man, you sure took Schafer! And him wearing brass knuckles!"

Bill shuddered. "Don't. The man's dead, Rocky."

"Good men or bad, they only die once." Rocky was blunt about it. "The world also lost Hod Kennedy."

They were speeding across the flats, heading for Boeing Field. The sky was clear and jeweled overhead, though mists still clung to the hills of West Seattle. The moon rode low there, paralleling their flight.

Bill leaned forward, burying his face in his hands. "I'd better phone Sam from the airport."

"He's a friend of yours," Rocky objected. "No use putting him on the spot. Those dicks will be pestering him with plenty questions." He shrugged. "Make it snappy, then. Tell him you're at the stage station, heading south."

They rolled into the vast airport. It was almost deserted at this hour, though the central administration building and the control tower above blazed with light.

A lone cabin ship waited on the adjacent runway, motor idling: a big ship, low-hung and powerful, an amphibian. Its streamlined pontoons were also equipped with twin landing wheels.

Bill entered the waiting room, saw the phone booth at the right, and went directly to it. He barely glanced about him. An attendant dozed in the ticket section. Except for a woman standing beside the door—she had been looking out intently at Bill and Rocky and gave Bill a level glance as he passed by—the big room was deserted.

Sam was aghast. "Good God, boy—where are you? No, don't tell me. Just tell me what happened."

Bill told him.

"There's a detective out at the desk," Sam said. "He called it robbery and murder. It seems Schafer had six thousand on him, cash, when he left De Silva's."

"No!" said Bill, horrified. "Somebody must have rolled him after I left!"

"It looks bad." Sam lowered his voice cautiously. He was speaking close to the mouthpiece. "I wish I could advise you, son. . . . What about your bags? And the cash you left here?"

"Forget the bags," said Bill, sick at heart. "Hold the cash. If I don't come back for it, use it to help somebody that's in a jam. Some moron like me. . . . So long, Sam."

He went outside, looking for Rocky. He had certain blunt questions to ask Rocky. Not that it made much

difference now. . . . But Rocky was not alone. He and the woman who had been waiting inside were moving toward the runway, talking together. Rocky was talking; she was listening. She was a young woman, dressed in an outdoor suit of heavy tweeds, woolen stockings, and walking shoes of sturdy British make. A close-fitting turban held her dark curls snugly. She carried herself well, head up.

They heard him coming and turned to wait for him under the light illuminating the sign: PASSENGERS ONLY. Bill saw her face fully and for an instant was touched by the same panic that had gripped him in the alley, when the police were closing in. Only this time there was no escape.

He knew her at once. The years had changed the mold but not the metal since those callow days at Shawnigan. Ruth MacRae was a grown woman now, touched with the poise rooted in breeding and wealth. Yet the same plebeian freckles, bane of her girlhood, bridged her patrician nose. The old copper tints were in her hair. Her long-lashed eyes had the same frank, almost haughty quality that had appealed to him years ago, when they had sprawled like puppies on the sunlit Strathcona dock.

"This here's Bill Kennedy, Miss MacRae," Rocky said. Standing a little behind her, he winked commandingly at Bill, a plain warning: "Play 'em as they fall."

She inclined her head a little, looking steadily at Bill. Bill gave her stare for stare, poker-faced. He was

thankful for one thing: she didn't remember him. She hadn't even known his surname at Shawnigan. It had just been "Bill" and "Ruth."

She said, with a touch of British accent and in the same impersonal manner with which she might have appraised a horse: "He seems a bit shopworn. And a little blotto, to boot."

Bill could feel himself flushing. Rocky said quickly: "Sho! Like I told you, I dragged him away from a party. These mining lads get that way in Seattle sometimes on a Saturday night. . . . Let's go."

"Rocky," Bill said, "I never liked jokers wild. I think I'll sit out. Thanks."

Rocky congealed on the instant. He dragged out a heavy watch and looked at it meaningly. "Sure it's jokers wild, son. And in a couple of minutes more some of your friends will be rolling in, raring to drag you back to the party."

"Come, come, Mr. Kennedy," said Ruth MacRae. The taut lines in her face softened. "Sorry, and all that. I'm sure you'll be honest and ethical tomorrow, even with a headache. . . . Let's go, by all means."

Bill hesitated, then inclined his head and followed along. Oddly, he recalled that he had hesitated in just that way when Rocky had placed the bottle of square-face on the table back there at the Denby.

But that, too, was a part of the pattern that had sped on into the loom.

The cabin was roomy: four places up forward, in-

cluding the pilot's, and a large freight compartment aft. Whitey Bodine stood up at the controls and faced them. Rocky introduced Bill, and they shook hands briefly. Whitey was about Bill's age, powerfully built and with hard, shrewd eyes. His eyelashes were light, and a tiny straw-colored mustache imparted a touch of cockiness to his bony features.

He said: "You're traveling light, Kennedy. No bags?"

"He's outfitting at Rupert," Rocky said. "I'll tell you about it. Let's go."

"Righto." Whitey settled at the controls, adjusting his safety belt. "Pick your places. Strap 'em on."

Rocky motioned Ruth up forward with Whitey, but she shook her head. "It's my turn with Mr. Kennedy, you know."

Rocky hesitated, gave Bill a meaning glance, and went forward.

The wind was from the north, and the field stretched south from this point. They taxied to the end of the runway, wheeled, and turned back. The ship hung on its brakes, quivering, while Whitey gunned it experimentally. Then they moved forward, motor thundering.

Both Rocky and Bill kept their faces glued to the window while the administration building dipped at an angle below them. There was no sudden burst of activity down there, no police cars skidding to a stop. No signal came from the control tower, calling them back. They climbed steeply toward the stars, while the

glittering city spread out below them and the Olympics across the Sound rose up like awakened giants.

Bill relaxed, eyes closed, his elbow resting on the window frame and his forehead pressed against his palm. He could feel his temples throbbing.

Rocky rolled Schafer, he thought. He was there. He couldn't resist it, with his buzzard instincts. He figured it was my money, anyway. . . . But where does that leave Bill Kennedy?

"Airsick?" Ruth MacRae asked, her matter-of-fact voice raised above the remote thundering of the motor. "You'll feel better when we've leveled off, I'm quite sure."

"Thanks," Bill said.

She leaned toward him; she was offering a cigarette. "I know," she said after they had lighted up. "Rocky told me he had to talk fast, that you had other plans. I'm no end grateful to you for jogging along with us."

"Quite all right," Bill said.

Her cigarette glowed. It lighted up her face, gave it a rosy hue. Her cheeks were dimpled, but her eyes were luminous and intent. "He's quite a salesman, isn't he?"

"Rocky?" Bill nodded, smiling a little. "Yes. By a coincidence I was just thinking about that."

CHAPTER V

THE AMPHIBIAN made altitude steadily. It had obviously once been an eight-place passenger job; it was both heavy and powerful and rode like a battleship. They seemed to hang suspended, like a great, lazy gull.

Yet dark clouds of land and the burnished Sound crept steadily by. The twinkling lights of Everett drifted below and past, and the clustered jewels of Anacortes strengthened ahead. They were boring steadily northward—literally north by west—their javelinlike flight only slightly retarded by the head wind.

Ruth MacRae asked: "Feeling better, Mr. Kennedy?"
"I feel fine," he lied.

It was no accident, he knew, that had placed her opposite him. Rocky and Whitey were up forward, heads together. Bill Kennedy's life history was probably unfolding there. At intervals Whitey gestured with his cigarette. It appeared—though one could never be sure about Rocky's self-deprecatory moods—that Whitey was naming the play and Rocky was hastening to agree.

Bill glanced at Ruth and saw at once that she was aware of it. A dim light overhead caused the interior of the cabin to be reflected on her window, superimposed upon the dim vista beyond and below. She was watching him there. Whitey was also watching in the rear-view mirror, his blue eyes, under their dust-colored lashes, flicking to the instrument panel and back in a hard, emotionless stare. Even Rocky's ears seemed alert and quivering.

Bill thought, with a species of apathetic grimness: *Look me over, folks. The specimen's trapped. Just don't place too many bets on how he'll perform.*

Ruth said, motioning westward: "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

It *was* beautiful. They were over the San Juans, and the hundred and eighty-odd islands were scattered like fragments of black cloud on a field of silver. Beyond was the dark mass of Vancouver Island, stretching, as into infinity, northward. The angle at which the moonlight fell caused its vast bulk to seem suspended between earth and sky.

"Look," she said. "D'you see something gleaming there in the hills? It's awfully far away. It's a little lake called Shawnigan."

"Pretty name," Bill agreed. He had already picked it out. Though they were some eighteen air miles distant he could almost see the blunt silhouette of Malahat on the near shore.

She turned to look at him. "You've never been there? You know, I've an odd feeling that we've met before."

"I think not," Bill said, drawing back. This was one angle that must be blocked at once; he wanted no part of it. Those callow days at Shawnigan were far in the past. As Rocky would say: "Way back and down."

She studied him a moment, then nodded. "It's of no importance, of course. . . . How well do you know Rocky Flynn?"

"Mostly by hearsay. He knew my father."

"What's his reputation? Or you'd rather not be questioned on that point?"

"I'd rather not. Does it have a bearing?"

She seemed surprised. "Doesn't it?"

"As I understand this job," Bill said, "there's a mine up at Luna Lake. I'm supposed to look at it. If it's good, it's good. If it isn't, it isn't. Where does Rocky's reputation enter the picture?"

"Or yours?"

"Let's clarify that point too," Bill said. He tried not to be too brusque about it. She knew nothing of the ruinous events from which he had just emerged. "I didn't want this job, you know. I had other plans."

"I'd gathered that."

"So if you've any doubts about me, I'll step out at Prince Rupert. Glad to, in fact."

She looked at him steadily, then her cheeks dimpled a little. "The subject seems a bit stiff-necked. . . . I

don't mean to antagonize you, Mr. Kennedy. Don't you see that I'm in something of a spot in this business?"

"To the extent of eighty thousand, yes. You may lose it. I don't know how much that means to you, of course."

"Nor care, do we infer?"

"I'm just the referee," Bill said.

Rocky came back. Ruth said, "Sit here," and went past him to settle herself beside Whitey. Bill saw another angle enter the picture and was astonished at the profound resentment it stirred in him. Whitey leaned over to talk to her and placed his hand on her knee. She struck it off and turned away from him. Whitey shrugged and said something, grinning. She lifted a shoulder, lighted a cigarette, and peered steadily out into the night.

Bill looked at Rocky. "Your pal's something of a heel, eh?"

"Whitey? Yeah." Rocky stifled a yawn. "Hang a skirt on a fence post and Whitey'd detour a mile just to lean against it. It's one of the crosses I got to bear in this blasted deal."

"How did you get into partnership with him?"

"I wish I knew," Rocky admitted. "We kind of come together, like a burr and a sheep. And I'll swear I don't know which one of us is wearing the wool. . . . Look." He pointed overside. "Quamichan."

"Never mind the view. There's some questions I want to ask you, cold turkey."

"Shoot," Rocky invited.

"You can count me out at Prince Rupert," Bill said. "I don't want any part of Luna Lake. The hell with it. . . . How's that for a starter?"

"Not bad." Rocky seemed unimpressed. "Only Whitey won't like it."

"So what?"

"When Whitey gets notions he's a wolf. I mean—tough." Rocky's eyes were bland. "He might even talk with the Provincial Police."

"And you wouldn't stop him?"

"I can't. He's got too much on me. He's behind me with a sharp stick. I'm behind you." Rocky spread his hands. "That's the picture, Bill."

"You framed me in Seattle."

"I was like the carp that climbed the tree," Rocky admitted. "The dogs was after him. I knew you wouldn't cut my throat."

"Why not?" said Bill angrily.

"Besides," Rocky said, "I ain't unreasonable. I'm paying you five grand for this side trip."

"Come back to the point," Bill told him. "You decided to rope me in. The squareface was the first round, eh?"

"That's how I figured it in the beginning," Rocky admitted. "But after sizing you up I was sure you'd wake up hostile, you being one of these lads with principles. So I figured a tangle with Schafer wouldn't do no harm. You'd end up in some sort of jam which

couldn't help but be useful to me. Never dreamt, of course, you'd go whole hawg and leave the critter toes up."

"You saw the fight?"

Rocky gave Bill a sidelong look. "I might have."

"And after I staggered away you rolled him. Took six thousand off him?"

"Six thousand?"

"Okay," said Bill, enraged anew. "But suppose I go up to Luna Lake, look that hole over, and tell Ruth she's been cold-decked?"

At once Rocky's half-humorous mask merged into the one that meant business. "Listen," he said. "You claimed a yen to talk turkey. You ain't learned yet what I learned years ago—to look facts in the face. A tree's a tree, and a rock's a rock. . . . All Whitey has to do is point his finger at you in Prince Rupert, and them Provincial Police would toss you into the bull pen before you could say, 'Bless us and save us!' They'd hold you for Seattle. That means hanging. Or a stretch behind bars that would see you tripping over your beard before you got out. Think that over."

"And just how," Bill retorted, "will playing ball with you two yeggs smooth my way?"

But Rocky, having shot his bolt, settled back in his corner, yawning. "Just put your mind to it. Read 'em as they lay. You'll be completely over your jag by the time we get to Prince Rupert."

"Maybe," Bill said.

He settled back morosely, stretching his legs, trying to find a comfortable posture in the corner formed by the seat back and the window frame. He finally made it: his cheek pressed against the cool glass, chin planted on the palm of his hand. Up forward Whitey sat erect, his tense pose suggesting that he, too, was battling weariness and lack of sleep. The ship almost flew itself, but they were still three hours from Prince Rupert.

Ruth was turned completely away from Whitey, her arm along the back of the seat and her head resting on her arm. She had her turban off, and her dark curls wavered under an invisible air current pumping down from a tiny air intake above. She seemed relaxed, except that her hand was clenched. Bill was touched by her pose. It was as though her pride and resolution were armor temporarily laid aside and she were a child resting there, uneasy and troubled, far from home.

"Yeah," Rocky said. Bill glanced at him and found Rocky studying him sleepily under the lowered brim of his hat. Only one eye was visible, and it twinkled. "Under all this cheerio, what-ho, and pip-pip she's quite a gal, ain't she? Life's full of problems."

CHAPTER VI

BILL WAS AWAKENED by the popping of his ears and the dwindling thunder of the motor. It was almost dawn, and they were skimming in over sluggish tidewater toward sleeping Prince Rupert. For a moment it seemed that they were too low. Then he remembered: the ship was an amphibian. Water was her element too. Her wheels would be up, her pontoons clear.

Green headlands loomed under low-hanging mist. The rankness of the underbrush that ended like a wall suggested that this was a spongy, dripping, rain-swept world. Yet the sky, this early Sabbath morning, was flawless.

The ship settled down with a soft impact and plowed on, heading directly toward a small moorage that flanked the main docks. Great warehouses loomed there, and above them the town huddled, gray and static. Whitey cut the motor, and they drifted in toward an open slip. Rocky swung down on a pontoon and fended them off, then stepped ashore and guided the ship alongside.

Not a soul was abroad, and not a dog barked in the silent town. Bill helped Ruth over to the slip, and they stood there for a moment, she tucking in her hair, studying her reflection critically in a compact mirror. Bill yawned. His hearing was partly deadened by the long-sustained thunder of the motor. He had, to his surprise, only a mild headache, though his tongue had the definite feel of dry moss.

Ruth gave him an appraising glance, smoothing the wrinkles in her tweed coat. "You look a trifle ancient this morning."

"I feel it," Bill admitted.

"Don't look at me too closely," she warned. "I know I'm a spectacle. But the pace has been a bit brisk since midnight."

Rocky and Whitey made fast, lashing the ship securely with crosslines that held the pontoons away from the dock. This chore done, Rocky swung aboard and handed out his bags and Ruth's. Whitey was in a sour mood. "Take the tourists up to the jolly hotel," he told Rocky when the luggage was unloaded. "The hired man's taking a nap."

Rocky said: "What time for breakfast?"

"Make it eleven. I'll have her gassed and checked. We can take off at noon."

Rocky led off at once with his bags. Bill followed with Ruth's. Whitey watched them go, then climbed back into the ship. Bill gathered that he slept in the

freight compartment, swinging a hammock between the stanchions.

It appeared, too, that Rocky and Whitey had planned all details of their stop in Prince Rupert. Rocky had wired ahead for rooms. One for Ruth and a large one, with twin beds, for him and Bill. The sleepy night clerk was expecting them; they were routed upstairs at once. "See you down in the dining room at eleven," Rocky told Ruth. "Come ready to travel. You won't need no bags—just your hands in your pockets."

She seemed surprised. "We make the round trip in one day?"

"We ain't using dog teams," said Rocky. "Three hours up there. Four, five hours at the mine—whatever you need, Bill. Then three hours back."

"Will that be long enough for a thorough check?" she asked Bill.

"It ought to be," Bill said. He didn't tell her that it was probable that thirty minutes would be enough. He had a hunch that even taking samples would be a waste of time: a gesture designed to impress a novice.

"Very well," she said. "I'll be ready."

There was a significant angle about the double room, Bill saw: Rocky proposed to have him under guard at all times. It didn't matter. He, Bill, hadn't dozed all the way up from the narrows. He had been thinking it out, facing the future with bitter clarity. Facing facts. And, as Rocky had said, he had found that a tree was a tree, and a rock was a rock.

The decision was simple and final: he could not go back to Seattle. The alternative was to drop completely out of sight. Out of life, as far as the world that had known Bill Kennedy was concerned. His path, such as it was, whatever meager rewards it offered beyond life itself, lay north. It was an abrupt shift in destiny; in a matter of hours his whole pattern of living had been torn apart. Still, it had been no more abrupt than the passing of Red Schafer. . . .

He was up and around before eleven. Rocky roused at once. "Loan me your shaving outfit, Rocky. While I'm sprucing up get out your map of Luna Lake."

Rocky blinked at him. "Map? There ain't any."

"Draw one, then. What's the general location?"

"East of the Finlay. This side of Sifton Pass."

"Hm-m," said Bill. "You picked rough country. Give me a general idea, old son. Show the best trail out afoot."

He had never known mental reactions as swift as Rocky's. One grizzled eyebrow shot up, the other lowered. That quickly, Bill knew, he understood.

"Not bad," Rocky said.

Bill bathed and shaved and came out, feeling better. He had been able to remove the adhesive from his jaw. Except for a deep but partly healed cut there and a welt almost hidden at the roots of his hair above his forehead, there were no marks of his fatal brawl with Schafer.

Rocky was dressed and was fashioning a crude map, scowling with concentration. His cheek bulged with an enormous chew. Bill dragged up a chair beside him and lighted a cigarette. Only a shadow of his headache remained. He was ravenously hungry.

Rocky indicated the map. "There you are. It's guess and b'gosh, but figure maybe twenty miles to the inch."

"Luna Lake's that small?" It was little more than a dot below the broken, meandering line that marked the crest of the Rockies.

"'Bout a mile and a half long, maybe a half wide. Here's what she looks like." Rocky drew it on the margin in larger scale. It was in the rough shape of an arrowhead, lying north and south. "This here prong feeds right out of a glacier—and it's a honey of a glacier, son. The face of it two hundred feet high, and blue, and the slope of it going up like the roof of a barn for maybe three quarters of a mile. That's still a half mile from the top. Whitey's altimeter says the lake sets at nine thousand."

Bill repressed a shudder. It was late fall here at tide-water. Up there winter would be knocking at the door. "The lake's frozen?"

"It wasn't last week. But any day now. No snow yet."

"Any timber?"

"Scrub and willows. Mostly on Glacier Bay." Rocky indicated the right, or east, fork of the lake. "Here's where we usually set down." He indicated the west fork. "The mine's in between, at the point, right smack

in the bottom of the cliff. There's a touch of beach there, and the beach runs around into Glacier Bay. Boy, that lake's deep! No bottom a-tall. Blue by day and black by night."

Bill studied the map. "It doesn't look far to the east fork." He spanned it. "Sixty miles?"

Rocky nodded. "Just a guess. And what miles! Some up, the rest down. A mountain goat could do it in a week, I reckon. And he'd know he'd been places. At that, it would be easier than trying the glacier. . . ." He sat back and looked hard at Bill. "We talking about the same thing, son?"

"Yes," said Bill grimly. "Part of it."

He got up and paced about the room, puffing on his cigarette. He crushed it in an ash tray, came back, and leaned opposite Rocky.

"I'm laying it on the line, Rocky. It's this—or nothing. If there's any debate I'll give myself up here. Seattle will pay my way back to the States."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," said Bill.

Rocky appraised him. "You mean it," he decided at length. "Okay—shoot the works."

Bill stated it bluntly. Ruth MacRae must remain here at Prince Rupert. She had no business flying up into the wilds with two crooks and a murderer. She'd lost her eighty thousand, which was a mere fraction of her means. Only stubbornness and pride were driving her on. He, Bill, would send her a written report on his

findings. He would tell her the mine was worthless but would make no guess as to how much money had gone into the hole, unless the facts justified it. Otherwise, he might go so far as to say that the amount spent was "substantial." That would take care of Ruth MacRae. . . .

"And now," Bill went on, "we come to the detail that takes care of Bill Kennedy. Can I buy a trail outfit here on Sunday?"

"You can't," Rocky said, watching him. "I can."

"That's your chore, then. We take aboard the ship, for me, one sleeping bag and tarp, grub for thirty days, one .30-.30 carbine, and ammunition. You'll leave me at Luna Lake. In a couple of days you fly back in. What do you find? I've fallen into a crevasse or drowned in the lake. Maybe there's a hole in the ice and a note in a forked stick. I'm a wanted man and I'm taking a short cut out, and the hell with it. The point is, the stage is set, proving I've cashed in. . . . Got it?"

"Hm-m," Rocky said. He, too, rose and stood looking down at the map, tugging at his mustache. "Then you'll make it to the east fork—you hope."

"Can it be done?"

"Might be. I seen the snow fields once from farther north. They looked drafty. . . . Still, there's a trapper up there below the timber line, on a creek just above the Meadows. The Meadows is a two-bit settlement." Rocky cocked an eyebrow at Bill. "Suppose Whitey won't go for it?"

"If he objects you'll persuade him."

"Me?"

"Yes," said Bill. "You, Rocky. I'm behind you with a sharp stick. Because if I give myself up you'll be in the next cell. Why? You'll be wanted in Seattle too. Not only as a material witness, but because you rolled Red Schafer."

Rocky stared at him and appeared to swell visibly to the eye. His mustache bristled, then he relaxed, grinning.

"You would get tough with *me*," he accused. "Using my own poison, at that! Okay, boy. I'm sold. And I'll fetch Whitey around. I'll get your outfit together after breakfast."

He got his bag packed and they started down.

They went down the hall in silence. Rocky was thinking, his hat pulled low. At the head of the stairs he said: "That's a tough trail, Bill."

"Shed no tears," Bill said. "Any trail leading away from that alley would have to be tough."

CHAPTER VII

RUTH had not yet come down, but Whitey was waiting in the otherwise deserted lobby. He was standing at a window which looked out over the docks below and the greenness of the bay beyond: a lean-legged yet bulky figure in a fleece-lined flier's jacket. He was bare-headed, and his tawny hair shone in the slanting sunlight.

He saw them coming, glanced at the clock above the desk, and motioned them to adjacent leather chairs. They sat down, forming a semicircle at the window, with Rocky in the middle.

Bill and Whitey examined each other with polite but hard-bitten interest. It was their first view of each other in the full light of day. Whitey, too, was freshly shaved. His clear skin would have given him a boyish air except for the bitter lines about his mouth and a hard, sullen quality in his slightly slanting eyes. They were not blue eyes, but gray, with a pale, albino cast.

That Bill's antipathy was mutual was revealed in

Whitey's first words, though they carried a pretense of bluff good humor.

"You picked a handsome lad, Rocky. That ought to help." He showed white, even teeth briefly. "It's mostly a selling job. But a tough one, Kennedy, with the gal looking for snakes in every bush."

"There'll be no selling," Bill said. "Let's get that straight right at the beginning. I'll call the shots as I see them, as is."

"So?" Whitey dropped his pretense. "What gives, mister?"

"Smooth down your hackles, the both of you," Rocky advised. "This is business. There's an angle developed."

Whitey nodded. "I can see that. He's gone soft on us?"

"Hard," Rocky said. "He's picked a hard row for himself. A natural for us." He told Whitey what Bill had stipulated: a light trail outfit, rifle and grub—and their collusion in reporting his death in the wilds.

Whitey blew a cloud of smoke upward and watched it dissipate toward the beamed ceiling.

"Not bad," he decided. "I've made a note of it. Someday I may have to take a powder myself. . . . There's a joker, though. Is the gal willing? I mean—to stay here at Rupert?"

"I'll do that much selling," Bill said. "I'll try to persuade her."

"It never hurts to try," Whitey agreed, showing his

teeth again. "D'ye mind if Rocky and I make a little private medicine?"

He rose without waiting for a reply and motioned Rocky to follow him. They moved across the lobby and leaned together against the cigar counter. Bill eyed them a moment, then got out his notebook and pencil and began to jot down his equipment list, the bare minimum for thirty days afoot in the winter wilds. Winter would have set in before he reached the east fork of the Finlay.

The clothes he was wearing—flannel shirt, leather jacket, whipcords, knee-length moccasins—were durable and protective enough for anything but the most bitter weather. He would need a fleece-lined helmet and snow glasses. He *might* attempt it across the backbone of the Rockies itself. . . . Heavy flannels and extra socks, two extra shirts, a toilet kit, tobacco for hand-made cigarettes. The rifle and sleeping bag, of course, a tarp, a mess-kit outfit, an emergency kit, a waterproof matchsafe.

The food list was easy: bacon, beans, flapjack flour, coffee, salt. He wouldn't need it all if he went direct to the east fork. But he might be longer than thirty days. A healthy man, trail-wise, could pack seventy pounds, make time, and live in comfort—until the thermometer dropped too low. . . .

He was suddenly overcome by the enormity of the thing that had happened to him. Twelve hours ago—exactly—he had been sitting at Jake's Place, a free and

hungry man, eating a T-bone, medium rare. He was seated in a steam-heated lobby now and in a matter of minutes would be eating with the others at a snowy-topped table. "Oatmeal and cream," he would tell the waiter. "Ham and two eggs. Buttered toast. A touch of marmalade. . . ." Twelve hours hence, by the clock, he would be sleeping by a lonely fire at Luna Lake:

Whitey and Rocky broke in on his reverie. Rocky grimaced toward the stairway: Ruth was coming down. Bill got up at once, and the three moved slowly toward her. Rocky was in the middle, and the other two towered over him. "It's okay, Kennedy," Whitey said guardedly. "We're all set. Just see that you don't vary the program."

Five hours of sleep had transformed Ruth. She used make-up only on her lips and needed little there, Bill thought. Her cheeks had the natural bloom of health, and she carried herself confidently erect. She was wearing her tweed suit and high-laced boots. Over her arm was slung a heavy coat, reversible, with flaring pockets. It appeared to be almost of ankle length. Though she believed she would be out in the wilds only a matter of hours, she had prepared with British thoroughness for any weather. Her woolen turban, Bill saw now, was so designed that it could be pulled down over her ears as a protection in bitter wind.

She was speaking to the clerk as they came up. "I'll be back tonight—rather late, I imagine. Hold the room for me, please. I've left my bags there." She turned to

the others, nodding toward the dining room. "Beautiful morning, what? Is the ship ready, Mr. Bodine?"

"All set."

"And how are you, Mr. Kennedy?"

"Hungry," said Bill.

She sat at his left at a table for four. The dining room overlooked the bay and docks, and the brilliant sunlight slanted in through the large windows. The ship was visible down there, floating like a gull. A small group of casual spectators stood near by, studying her sleek lines.

The waiter came and stood by. Ruth said to Bill, obviously in cheerful mood: "Order first, please. Then I won't be ashamed to ask for as much as I want. I'm ravenous."

Bill said, smiling a little: "Oatmeal and cream. Ham and two eggs. Buttered toast. . . ."

"Excellent," she approved. "That's substantial. Duplicate it for me, please." Bill never forgot what she added; it was as though she were reminding him: "And a spot of marmalade."

Whitey said little while they ate, his colorless glance straying again and again to the waiting ship below. Rocky, too, was preoccupied, his attention fixed on his plate. Yet Bill knew that both were intent on him and Ruth, studying their reactions, seeking clues in their outlook that might bear on the day's business.

Ruth herself seemed entirely at ease. She discussed the flight up from Seattle, the beauty of the Inland

Passage by moonlight, their impending haul to the mountains. She might have been a tourist hugely pleased at a prospective jaunt off the beaten trails.

"Imagine—from here to almost the top of the Rockies and back in one day! And time for business up there too. It's quite a lark, isn't it?"

"No," said Bill. "It's all business." They were smoking over their coffee now; the time had come to tell her the changed plan. "I hate this, but it's got to be done." He looked at the others. "Incidentally—why me? You tell her, Rocky."

"Not me," Rocky returned. "It's your idea. Don't you be ashamed of your offspring."

"Tell it fast," Whitey said, looking down toward the ship. "Make it good."

She looked from one to the other. "It sounds a bit mysterious."

"It's just horse sense," Bill said. "We've decided that you should stay here at Prince Rupert, Miss MacRae. It's too dangerous a flight up there for you, and it isn't necessary. I'll take samples, look the ground over, and make you a complete written report."

There was a momentary silence. She glanced at Whitey and Rocky, then looked steadily at Bill.

"Are you serious, Mr. Kennedy?" He had expected her to be surprised. He was unprepared for the storm signals that flamed in her cheeks and sparkled in her eyes. "Who are 'we'—the ones who've decided this?"

"All of us. It was my idea, as Rocky said."

"My word! After I consented to fly down to Seattle, to find someone I could trust to help me appraise the mine . . ." Her head came up. "I'm curious about something, Mr. Kennedy. The theory that it's too dangerous for me to fly up to Luna Lake is silly, of course. You know that. Have you discovered some reason—were you helped to discover it—why I should *not* be on the ground?"

"I'd give you the same report in any event," he said. "If you doubt that, of course, flying up there at all's a waste of time."

"Hold everything," Rocky interposed. He had adopted an air of injured dignity. "You called us crooks, gal, sight unseen, notwithstanding that we also lost our shirts in this deal. What's the only chance we got to square ourselves? Get us an expert who'll look it over and call a spade a spade. We've got him. You okayed him. Don't you ask us——"

"Listen to *me*, Mr. Flynn." Her bearing was resolute, though her voice trembled a little. "I've never called you crooks. I've had my opinion, which I'm entitled to, but I've given you the benefit of the doubt all along. All I've asked is to see the mine and have somebody with me—an expert, somebody that's unbiased——"

"Pardon," said Whitey, looking at his watch. He had had time to think, and though outwardly he appeared merely to be amused, delighted at her spirit, Bill saw the tightness about his lips. "Time's on the wing. The answer is no? You still want to go along?"

"I insist on it."

"And if we insist it's too dangerous a trip for a woman, what then?"

"Then I'll remind you," she said, "that you wanted me to fly up there alone, with just you two, and I refused. The danger didn't enter then. Obviously it's just an excuse now. It's probably best, at that, since Mr. Kennedy has raised the point himself. That was a blow, Mr. Kennedy." She gave Bill a level look, crushed her cigarette in the tray, and rose to her feet. "Very well, I'll phone the authorities at once."

A blind man could have known that this was no bluff. Bill caught a glance that passed between Whitey and Rocky—a hard-bitten question, an equally formidable answer.

"Wait," said Whitey as they all arose. "It was just an idea, Kennedy." His expressionless eyes were fixed on Bill. "You'll withdraw it?"

"Sure he will," Rocky said. "Why not?"

Bill thought fast, caught between two fires. Almost immediately he echoed Rocky's conclusion: "Why not?" Since she insisted and was aroused on the point, she might as well go along to the lake. There, on the ground, he could tell her the true situation, asking only that she keep the facts hidden—for her own sake—until she was again safe in Prince Rupert. It might be awkward explaining to her why he was remaining at the lake. But that bridge could be crossed when they came to it.

"It's all right," he told her. "My mistake. If you're willing to face the risk, certainly you should see the mine."

"D'you mean that?" she asked, studying his face.

"Of course."

"Why shouldn't I place it before the authorities anyway?"

Bill shrugged, playing it out. "Suit yourself. The police wouldn't let you fly up there; you can depend on that."

This stopped her for the moment. Rocky hastened to make it final, motioning toward the lobby. "That's what comes from having an honest man amongst us," he told her. "He's so different, you figure he must be a wolf."

"That isn't fair," she returned. "*He* suggested it."

They paused in the lobby, and Whitey said at once: "Rocky and I'll dash out and pick up the equipment, Kennedy. We'll get old Thiebault to open up his store. It won't take long. You and Ruth wait here for us, eh?"

Bill nodded, motioning Ruth to one of the leather chairs. She sat down a little doubtfully. "Equipment?"

"I'm traveling light," Bill explained. "They're picking up a few odds and ends for me. . . . Here's the list, Rocky." He drew the others toward the center of the lobby.

When they were out of Ruth's hearing he said: "Look

the list over, Rocky—you'll know better than I what I'll need. If I've missed anything, put it on."

Rocky nodded.

"Keep her right here," Whitey told Bill, indicating Ruth. "Don't let her talk to a soul. You know why we can trust you to see that she doesn't."

"I know," Bill said. "My neck's involved. Don't bet that stack too often, Whitey, m'lad. It pays off only once."

"Let's go," said Rocky hurriedly. "That said eleventh hour's sneaking up on us. Fact is"—his mustache spread—"for a minute in there I dang near heard it strike!"

CHAPTER VIII

BILL CAME BACK and swung a chair around so that he could sit down beside Ruth. He adopted an easy front, getting out his cigarettes, but inwardly he was touched a little with embarrassment. It was his first time entirely alone with her. In view of the suspicions that had flared up in the dining room, this interval of waiting might be a trying one. To hold her in line, soothe her qualms might take a little finesse.

She seemed matter-of-fact enough, armored by her usual reserve, but he knew she was on guard, undecided. She refused a cigarette and continued to sit bolt upright, looking out of the window, not down at the bay and docks, but obliquely, to her left. He followed her glance and saw Whitey and Rocky at a distance, descending toward the town's business district. They moved past the corner of a frame building and were gone.

She faced him more fully. "You thought I was silly in there"—she indicated the dining room with a tilt of

her head—"accusing you of being in collusion with them. Didn't you?"

"It's all right," he said with a guilty twinge. "You're afraid there's some foul plot?"

"I'm sure of it. To be quite honest"—she flushed a little but met his gaze squarely—"I'm a bit dubious now about your part in it. Am I merely being naïve?"

"Not at all. But what are you afraid of?"

She got up restlessly, and he arose with her. They moved closer to the window and stood looking out over the bay. It was drenched in sunlight, and the water was entirely green. There was no activity at the water front, but far in the distance a tiny tug labored placidly, pushing an empty scow along.

"Why," she asked, "did you suggest that the trip was too dangerous for me and then change your mind when I mentioned the Provincial Police?"

"It was my duty to mention it. Any trip at this season's bad. It's a nice day here, but we don't know what sort of storm's blowing east of the Finlay."

"You've no reason to fear an official investigation?"

He looked at her steadily. "That would be a complication, wouldn't it?"

She was maneuvering him into something; he wasn't sure what. She tried another tack. "This whole thing seems a bit casual—this trip to the lake, I mean. It's agreed that we can't possibly get back until late tonight. Doesn't it seem odd that nothing has been said about food up there? Not even a lunch?"

"They probably forgot it," he said with relief. Here was a diversion. "I'll go order something right away. A sandwich apiece. And some chocolate bars."

"You seem to have an answer for everything," she said.

He came back from the dining room warily. She was seated against the farther wall, writing. She appeared not to notice him, and he leaned against the window, watching her. He'd had gloves on with boxers like that. They circled and sparred, seemingly inept. But when the opening came and they stepped in, it was bad.

This was dynamite. She was writing a letter. To whom? She glanced up twice as she wrote, once at a calendar on the wall, once at the clock over the desk. She folded the letter, sealed it, and looked directly at him.

"Mr. Kennedy."

He went over at once and leaned both hands on the edge of the desk, gripping it hard. He watched her moisten the stamp with the tip of her tongue and affix it.

"It's to the Provincial Police here," she said. "About you, Whitey, Rocky—everything. They'll get it tomorrow. A good idea, don't you think?"

"Splendid," he lied. It was a ruinous development. He could explain nothing to her now. With this letter in the hands of the police it would be too late. Yet how head her off? "Of course you'll be back tonight," he

said casually. It had to be casual. "You could wait and give them a complete report."

"If my suspicions are wrong I'll be glad to apologize," she said, getting up. She left the letter lying on the desk. "Mail it for me. D'you mind?" She indicated the letter box across the lobby and sauntered toward the window.

It was one of those things. Something had to be done, and quickly. He picked up the letter—and an empty envelope lying near by. On the way to the box he slid her letter into his pocket. At the box, knowing she was watching him, he dropped the empty envelope in.

I'm a beel to do this, he thought, coming back. I'll tell her about it up at the lake.

"Look," she said, pointing out the window. "Here comes Rocky. He's alone."

"Whitey's probably gone down to the ship," Bill said. "Yes—there he is." Whitey's distant figure was plain; he was just stepping out on the slip. Bill guided Ruth away from the window before she could notice the considerable equipment that Whitey was carrying. "Might as well shove off. Where are those sandwiches?"

"I've got them." She patted the bulging pocket of her coat.

"And here's Rocky."

Rocky came just inside the door and motioned to them. They joined him and went out into the brilliant sunlight.

"We're all set to travel," Rocky said, peering up at

Bill. "Whitey's down there now. Everything jake with you folks?"

"Jake," Bill said.

Ruth laughed outright. For no reason that Bill could fathom, she was suddenly in high good spirits. She clung to his arm as they descended the steep sidewalk toward the docks. There were cleats nailed across the boards to prevent slipping. As they lurched down it, her firm body pressed momentarily against him. "You know," she said, "I like that. I've made a note of it." She repeated it musingly: "Jake. . . ."

When they came down to the ship distant loiterers began to move toward them. The take-off promised a break in the monotony for these curious ones. Rocky glowered at them. "Let's get going, before these rail-birds begin to ask questions. . . . Whitey wants you inside, Bill. He's trimming ship."

Bill immediately stepped out on the pontoon and clambered aboard. Rocky kept Ruth ashore, and Bill soon saw why. The new equipment was outspread on the freight compartment floor. Whitey's hammock and blankets were draped over a rack.

"Look it over, Kennedy. We figured you'd want to inspect it. It sure cost us dough."

"Charge it," Bill said.

Whitey laughed unpleasantly. "We've done that."

It was good equipment, in every detail, and complete. Bill had known that Rocky would see to that. The rifle was in a leather scabbard—a necessity on a

mountain haul, where a single accidental blow against a rock could ruin the front sight. He drew it out and looked at it. It was new and a beauty: spotless, its packing grease meticulously wiped away. He slid it back, checked the ammunition, the eider-down sleeping bag, the grub, the nested cooking utensils.

"Okay," he said. "That's swell, Whitey."

"You can help Rocky cast off," Whitey said. "Wait till I give you the high sign. I'll stow this stuff way back. We're nose-heavy, with all the tanks full. . . . Tell Rocky to tell that egg from the moorage to stand by. I'm going to leave my junk ashore."

Bill nodded and swung down. He gave Rocky the message, and Rocky motioned to a grizzled old-timer standing on the main dock. The man slouched up and stepped over to the pontoon.

"Can't I get aboard?" Ruth asked.

"Wait," Rocky said. "Whitey's the skipper."

Whitey appeared at the door presently and handed down his blanket bundle and a small bag. The man balanced the bundle on his shoulder, grasped the bag, and staggered away. "Stick 'em in my locker," Whitey called after him. "I'll be after it tonight. . . . All right," he told the others. "We're set."

Bill helped Ruth aboard, then stepped back to help cast off. "I'll take the other side," Rocky said and circled the end of the slip.

Bill cast off the outer line first. The ship's nose was pointing inshore, and as he came forward Bill saw

Rocky, across the slip, in conversation with a tall, dour man in the uniform of the Provincial Police.

In spite of himself, a reaction not associated with conscious will, Bill halted and stepped back so that the intervening struts partly hid him from view. He pretended to busy himself coiling the line, amazed at the fierceness of the urge that had caused him to seek cover, its utter lack of reason. If the officer had come to arrest him there was no escape.

But Rocky came around the slip alone. He motioned Bill aboard, and Bill stepped quickly to the pontoon and swung up into the cabin. Whitey was just beginning to wind the manual starter.

"Sit down here," Ruth whispered, indicating the seat opposite.

The ship was moving. Rocky fended it out of the slip, turned it, and at the last moment swung aboard. He came up into the cabin, bringing his coiled lines with him. The ship moved clear, and the whine of the starter approached its peak.

Having stowed the lines, Rocky paused momentarily beside Bill, his back to Ruth. "That was a close squeak, son. See the guy I was talking to? Sergeant Henshaw of the jolly Provincials."

"I saw him," Bill said.

Rocky nudged him jovially. "He's a curious critter. He wanted to look us over, particularly you, but I told him we'd all be back tonight. If he'd known you were

from Seattle we'd never have shoved off. . . . No charge, boy. Happy to oblige."

The motor took hold thunderously. Whitey throttled it down, and they glided into open water. "Strap 'er on," he called back. "I warmed up an hour ago."

Bill tightened his safety belt, and Ruth did the same. Whitey gave them a glance in the mirror, and the motor thundered. They crept forth sluggishly at first but gathered momentum fast. The water became a speeding blur; the impact of small waves caused the whole ship to tremble.

Then they shook free and were off.

Bill did not look at the docks and the city falling away below. He sat impassively, face upturned to the blue of the sky. It was a narrow view but better than looking through bars. . . . He was winging away from the police now—away from life and the roster of the living. And there was no turning back.

Ruth's hand touched his arm. He glanced at her, and she motioned him to lean across the aisle. When he did so she placed her hand across his shoulder, pulling his head closer.

"We're in the air now," she said. Her lips were almost brushing his ear, so that he could hear her above the all-out bellowing of the motor, laboring in the climb. The fragrance of her hair was close. "Nothing can stop us. I couldn't wait to tell you how sorry I am."

She drew back, so he could see her face fully, and

kept her hand on his shoulder. There was nothing coquettish in it—merely a frank, confident gesture. Her smile was touched a little with shyness.

"Sorry? About what?"

"Because I doubted you back there. When you mailed that letter I knew everything was all right. I made you do it, and you didn't even hesitate. So I'm not afraid now. And please forgive me."

That hurt. He could almost feel the letter burning holes in his pocket. "Think nothing of it," he said with attempted lightness. "It might have been just a bluff, you know. My past may be as black as Whitey's and Rocky's. Worse, even."

She laughed outright. "No doubt. Be sure to make a clean breast of it as soon as that terrible motor quiets down." She gave his shoulder a little pat and pushed him away.

CHAPTER IX

AS THE SHIP MOUNTED steadily into the sunlight, bearing north by east over the forested hills of the interior country, Bill settled back comfortably, gripped by a sort of grim relief. They had missed official scrutiny narrowly at the take-off. Now they were winging away from all such complications—and the mistakes and tragedies of the past—at a speed of approximately three miles per minute. No living person except the four in this cabin knew their destination.

He had copped that last bet himself through his sleight of hand with Ruth's letter. This entailed an obligation that could not now be side-stepped, at whatever cost to his own chances: before his own exit he must see her safely into the clear, safely en route back to Prince Rupert. On the ground, up there at the lake, he must do two things. First, he must convince Whitey and Rocky that she was "sold"—sold on their honesty, on the theory that she had lost her money in a legitimate enterprise. They had to be sure of that point. They

had too much at stake to leave any doubts about it.

Second, he must give her the true facts about the mine before she left the lake, warning her to pretend to be resigned about her losses until she got back to the protection of the police. He was sure she could carry off that part of it, even with Rocky. She had already proved her caliber as a gambler.

Toughest chore—and last—would be to explain to her why he was remaining behind. He'd have to cook up something on the ground, some plausible story guided by expedience, the fall of the cards. It wouldn't be necessary to convince her. She'd find out all about him—the letter, his record in Seattle, the whole picture—the moment she got back to Prince Rupert. She'd condemn him then, no matter what he'd done in her behalf up at the lake. He'd be on a par with Whitey and Rocky in her estimation. Worse, even, because she'd trusted him.

It didn't matter. By that time, when she was safely in the clear, the world that included Ruth MacRae—and any number of other things beautiful and desirable—would be remote on Bill Kennedy's horizon.

They were presently winging past the northern ram-parts of the Babines. The coastal forest was dwindling at the rear: an undulating carpet spangled with the silvery threads of myriad streams. Eastward, mountain peaks were rearing like foam-crested billows frozen against the blue of the sky. Whitey's course was still

north by east; they were crossing the divide into the lonely and turbulent wilds bordering the Finlay.

It was a modern miracle: air travel. Thirteen hours ago they had been in Seattle, hundreds of miles to the south. The mountains and valleys across which their shadow was drifting now would have taken weary days to penetrate afoot. Shortly now they would be five hundred miles inland, close to two miles up the slopes of the Rockies, in a trackless region designated thus far merely as "somewhere this side of Sifton Pass."

He had intended to say little to Ruth until they got to the lake. Two words must cover their entire relationship during the fleeting hours left: strictly business. It was tough but fact. It would leave fewer scars. But it occurred to him, with the Rockies actually in view, that he must warn her to say nothing, announce no decision, until he gave the word. To that extent she must be on guard.

He glanced at her and found her half turned toward him, an elbow resting on the window frame, her chin cupped in her hands. She was studying him smilingly, her booted legs crossed. Her coat was thrown back in the warmth of the cabin, and he was pleasantly aware of the rich curves of her healthy, full-bodied figure. Physically as well as spiritually she had emerged as from cautious armor.

She beat him to the punch; her first words set him on his heels. A demure twinkle in her eyes showed it to be deliberate.

"It's about time," she said. "And I hope I've read all those scowls and nods correctly. We're in this together, so let's not pretend any more, eh? Very well. How are you, Bill?"

He stared at her. Her manner of saying it took him back through the years—all the long way back to Shawnigan.

"You knew me all the while?" he demanded incredulously.

"Of course, you goose. As soon as I saw you—blotto and battered as you were. D'you think I'd have approved you so quickly if I hadn't?"

She was enjoying his astonishment. He was thankful that Whitey wasn't watching him in the mirror, or Rocky. He couldn't analyze the force of the emotions that shook him. The old hurt was there—and a guilty, poignant thrill. *Watch your step, Kennedy*, he thought. *Don't say you didn't know better.*

"You're looking quite popeyed," she said placidly. "Still, there's a doubtful touch. Like that dismal look you gave me when we first met at Seattle. . . . Incidentally, why pretend you didn't know me?"

"I didn't," he said, adopting her own light manner.

"Come, come—it was written all over your face. 'Heavens,' says you, 'here's that woman again!' It wasn't very flattering. Explain it, sir."

"I'll do that," he agreed. He was playing with fire and knew it and drove on recklessly. "It's true that I knew a girl named Ruth once at Shawnigan. I didn't

know her last name then, or care. A charming child—freckled, unaffected——”

“But spoiled,” she said. “And plump. You liked that, I recall—at least you said you did. I loved you for it, extraordinary as your tastes were.”

“For whatever it’s worth,” he asserted, surveying her cheerfully, “I still do.”

She pretended to shrink from him. “Please!”

“This Ruth I mention,” he went on, “was my boyhood sweetheart. She still is. I’ve never forgotten her. . . . But she’s only a memory. *That* Ruth’s gone—if you follow me.”

“I’m a little outdistanced,” she admitted. “I’m still here. Or were you talking about me?”

“No. The lady I met at the Seattle airport was Miss Ruth MacRae. The granddaughter of Alexander MacRae——”

“In person,” she said with a sigh. “Can I ever live that down?”

“A wealthy woman. Quite hard-boiled in business matters. Aware of her background, social connections, and all that. Nevertheless, quite charming in her way.”

“Thank you so much.”

“But not my way,” Bill said smilingly. “She was a stranger to me. My Ruth was gone—years before.”

“Really? What happened to her?”

“She disappeared—like that!” He snapped his fingers. “Pouf! One of these female Yehudis. . . . Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten her exit line?” He sat up, gave her

a haughty look, and imitated her prim, mortified words of long ago: "‘You *live* here? . . . My word—I thought you were one of *us*!’ Remember now?"

"Perfectly. Only you make it sound quite stuffy. It *was* stuffy, of course. . . ." She gave him a level, doubtful glance, suddenly ill at ease. It made him feel like a heel to see her confident good spirits dashed. "You've hated me all these years."

"Not hate. It's just that I'd never been high-hatted like that before—nor since."

"I think I can explain it," she said. She was almost timid about it. He had never seen her in more charming guise. "Shall I try?"

It made him feel ashamed, made his whole viewpoint seem trivial. "Forget it. It was just kid stuff. Water over the dam."

She insisted: "Please. And I also want to discuss that woman of wealth you mentioned. The granddaughter of Alexander MacRae. . . . Only you mustn't misunderstand my motives. I mean—I didn't intend——" She floundered, groping for words. "I'm not just trying to win you over to my side. Please understand that."

"Of course." It was his turn to be embarrassed. "Proceed with confidence."

It was already too late. Rocky was turned out into the aisle, his gaze fixed vacantly upon them, exchanging a last word with Whitey. He was preparing to get up. The ship was pitching a little, riding invisible cur-

rents. The motor was roaring in a deeper, more robust tempo.

Ruth beckoned Bill closer. He caught something like relief in her smiling glance. "We'll have to compare notes later. Up there—or on the way back tonight. . . . Yes, on the way back."

"It'll have to be on the ground," Bill said. "Meanwhile, remember"—he spoke warningly, dropping his light manner—"don't believe anything Whitey says, or Rocky, unless it's confirmed by me."

"You mean about the mine?"

"And about me."

She didn't understand, but her surprised glance touched and thrilled him. "Naturally," she said.

Rocky came back and stood between them, studying their faces in turn. What he saw there appeared to please him; his mustache spread benevolently.

"We're flying at better than ten thousand," he said. "Just crossing into the Finlay. Whitey's got some sort of breather going up there, so his windows are clear. Had you noticed how yours are frosted up?"

They hadn't noticed, but their windows were thinly spangled. Ruth placed her finger tips against the glass and shivered. "I'm glad I brought my big coat."

Rocky beamed at Bill. "You folks kind of got together, eh? You told her all about yourself?"

"Not yet. We've just been gossiping."

"No fooling?" Rocky stared at Bill under lowered

brows, then turned to Ruth. "D'ye mind easing up there with Whitey?"

She glanced at Bill for confirmation. When he nodded she got up briskly and went forward. Whitey leaned toward her at once, motioning her closer.

Rocky settled himself into Ruth's place with a sigh.

"Might as well strap 'er on," he said. "We set right here till we hit Luna Lake. Whitey don't want us moving around. . . . You shorely missed the boat, son. You mean to say you ain't told the gal where you stand with respect to John Law? You ain't prepared her for nothing?"

"You expected me to?" Bill countered.

Rocky shook his head with a species of bitter awe. "For a lad as hard-boiled as you, you're the hopefulest that ever stumbled into a bear trap. You still got the quaint notion that all you got to do is look at the mine, tell the gal what you see, and then walk out of the picture?"

Bill stared at him. "What else?"

His response, or his manner, was sufficient answer for Rocky. He sat back and pulled his hat low over his eyes. "Doggone!"

"What are you driving at? Is there something about the deal up there that I ought to know?"

But Rocky was plunged completely into gloom. "Plenty. I'd aimed to give you the works, gambling that you'd have her sympathies roused up, so she'd battle beside you to a finish. It's too late now. . . . I'll

tell you this much, boy. Don't make a move up there; don't say a word—I mean after you've read the cards—'less you've figured what the pay-off is. Just recall that there's more than your scalp depending on your guessing right."

Bill nodded. "Yours, for instance?"

"Correct," Rocky said. "And the gal's."

CHAPTER X

WHEN they left the watercourse of the Finlay, which was little more than a faint line meandering far below, it seemed that Whitey was hurling the ship directly into the face of vertical dimensions. Bill rubbed some of the frost from the window and peered out, awed by the nearness and stupendous mass of the continental barrier. High as they were, snowy crests towered above them, dwarfing their insect flight. Reflected sunlight blazed there, soft but blinding from the snow fields, flaming with hard brilliance from icy cliffs and pinacles.

They were mounting up a vast cleft whose bottom was spotted with islands of timber. It seemed to be a blind canyon, narrowing and pinching out somewhere in the chaos above. The timber thinned moment by moment and finally disappeared. Giant walls shouldered in, and the floor of the crevasse mounted in great steps centered by thin ribbons of waterfalls.

Bill wondered what frail hunch had brought the dis-

coverer of Luna Lake winging up such a forbidding gorge. A motor failure here would have meant disaster. Certainly, from the ground, exploration would be almost impossible. No expedition on foot, unless led by expert mountain climbers equipped for an alpine ascent, could scale the successive barriers that choked the depths below.

Three giant bends between ever-narrowing walls brought the end in sight, far in the upper distance: a tiny V that framed the blue-white, jagged face of a living glacier. Above rose the cloudlike masses of the eternal snow fields. The glacier seemed to press against that meager cleft. Yet the crystalline air was deceptive: there could be a half-mile pocket between.

"That's it?" Bill asked with a somber thrill.

Rocky nodded. "Question is, how much ice is on the lake?"

Bill was absorbing the impact of another question, belated and staggering: was *this* the terrain from which he had planned so glibly to emerge—afoot? Descent down the gorge, the way they had come, was obviously impossible. The first jump-off up there could not be scaled. This was evident from the manner in which the thin waterfall pouring out from the point of the V broke and faded into mists below.

The remaining sides of the basin that cupped the lake seemed equally formidable. The wall was sheer on the right, or south. Eastward, dead ahead, the roots of the glacier ended in snow fields and outthrust escarpments

that seemed to hang down from the sky. The only possible way out, if there was a way, lay to the north, over giant slopes whose contours were hidden.

Here we are, gambler, Bill thought grimly. *The last chip—and we've bet it, sight unseen.* It had seemed plausible on paper, in the safety of Prince Rupert. This was reality. When they came to the gap the crest of the waterfall was still above them. Whitey was forced to veer away and bank sharply, circling for more altitude. It was a tight circle because the unyielding walls were close. The shadow of the plane circled with them on the white mists that rose up from the base of the falls.

As they came about on the return swing and leveled off, pointing directly at the gap, the surface of the lake came into view, static and frozen. The arm thrusting into the base of the glacier, lined with scrub timber, was also solid. But as the gap rushed toward them and the interior angle widened, the west arm, or bay, was revealed as open water. It was blue water, rimmed by a thin line of frost and ice at the base of the black cliff.

The moment they were through the gap Whitey nosed the ship down sharply. "Hang on!" he shouted through the drumming quiet of the cabin. "We're liable to hit hard."

The ice streamed by underneath. Its ragged edge shot past, and they were over open water. The cliff hurtled toward them; the intervening distance seemed all too short. They struck with a considerable impact and

seemed to bounce as from concrete, then they mushed down and the pontoons took hold.

Whitey instantly came about, gunning the motor. Their left wing tip seemed almost to sweep the face of the wall as they paralleled the shore. The motor roared once more, maintaining their headway, then dwindled and died.

Whitey stood up at the controls, looking ahead. "Okay, Rocky."

Rocky, already free of his safety belt, snatched up a coiled line, opened the door, and swung down to a pontoon. Bill followed, and together they fended away from the broken rock that crumbled down to the water's edge. Then Rocky leaped ashore, crunching through the marginal ice and bristling frost. He drew the ship in gently and began to make fast to the base of a gnarled shrub.

Bill straightened up and looked about him, drawing the chill, thin air deeply into his lungs. Wind was far overhead, moaning in the upper crags. That desolate sound and the distant monotone of the waterfall merely sharpened by contrast the vast and imposing silence of the peaks. That was Bill's first impression of Luna Lake: its high and almost austere remoteness. Except by air it was as aloof from the ordinary paths of man as a lonely crater of the moon.

They were moored against the side of a low headland that separated the two forks of the lake. It was a moraine composed of fallen and disintegrated fragments

of rock that had thundered down from the heights in ages past. Beyond the ridge, on the glacier bay, was a stand of stunted but thick-limbed spruce and a ragged fringe of willows. Partly hidden there was some handiwork of man not visible from the gap when they had winged in: a shake-roofed, log-walled cabin. The shakes were new, the unpeeled logs not yet weathered.

Then Bill saw the mine, just above the ridge and overlooking the bay where the ship floated. Its entrance was unimpressive: a tunnel peering blackly from the sheer base of the cliff. The broken rock disgorged from it sloped down in a widening fan to the water's edge. It was the volume of those tailings that carried significance to discerning eyes.

"How far did you go in, Rocky?"

"Better than eighty feet," Rocky returned with virtuous pride. "Maybe twenty more after it pinched off. Plus a couple thirty-foot drifts north and south, trying to pick 'er up."

This was mystifying to Bill. He had assumed from the first that the mine was merely a stage prop in an out-and-out swindle. Yet in this tough-textured rock—it was durable igneous—the cost of such development and exploration, with every ounce of equipment flown in by air, could easily run high into five figures. Was it possible that he could honestly give these two cutthroats a clean bill of health?

Whitey's brittle voice spoke at his back: "All right, Mr. Kennedy—give the little lady a hand."

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Bill turned, found Ruth descending, and helped her down to the pontoon beside him. She stood there a moment, waiting for Rocky to come closer and help her jump ashore. She was wearing her greatcoat and mittens, and her cheeks were already rosy with the cold. "Br-r. It's like an icebox, isn't it?"

"And getting colder," Rocky agreed, holding out his hand. "Hear that wind up there? It's from the east, which means a storm's brewing tonight, if I'm any judge. . . . Okay—jump!"

Ruth leaped ashore lightly for all her swaddling clothes. Whitey, still standing inside the cabin door, spoke tersely:

"Listen, folks. We hit this right on the nose. A couple of hours more and we couldn't have set down until the lake was solid. Which means we've got to do our business fast and get out of here. We'll have to take off down-wind, as it is. . . . You two start up there, Rocky. Kennedy can overhaul you."

Rocky and Ruth turned up the slope at once, their breaths rising in white puffs above them. Whitey was squatting just inside the cabin door, Bill's equipment near by.

"Here's your helmet," he told Bill, motioning him closer. "And your rock hammer and flashlight. It's all you need?"

Bill nodded, buttoning on the helmet. It was fleeced-lined and comfortable. He lowered his voice, though Rocky and Ruth were already out of earshot. "How

are you going to get my trail outfit ashore? Without Ruth seeing it?"

"While you're up in the tunnel. I'll hustle it across and cache it in the cabin. If she happens to see me tell her anything that crosses your mind. I'm a mail carrier. Or Santa Claus. She'll believe you, being beautiful and dumb. You're our star salesman, pal. But listen, Kennedy—watch your step."

Bill looked up at him quickly. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning just what you think, m'lad. You know what you've been hired to do—show her as little as possible, tell her as little as possible, but see that she's completely sold. She signs off here. Rocky thinks you can do it. I'm the lad who's in a position to tell you, cold turkey: you've *got* to."

Bill waited. "What else?"

"This," said Whitey. "You'll find the west drift sealed up. A heavy door with a padlock on it. There's tools and giant powder stored there, nothing else. Tell her so—and hurry by."

"Hm-m," Bill said. "A padlock. . . . What's inside?"

"Tools and giant powder. There's a crack on the left. Shine your light through and you'll see the tools, leaning against the wall."

"I know. But what else is in there?"

"Listen," Whitey said. "What you want out of this deal is two things—see that the gal gets a square deal and save your own hide. Right?"

Bill nodded. Whitey's slanting eyes turned up toward

the mine. Rocky and Ruth, climbing leisurely, were halfway up the slope of the tailings.

"This is the dope, then," Whitey said. "Cold turkey. . . . We thought we had something up there. We bet a hundred grand on it. Then it pinched off. Okay, so we folded. The other stockholders folded. Ruth folded—and then changed her mind, bless her! Which left us out on a limb—plenty."

"Why?"

"We had that hole. We were stony-broke. We had to get some capital together, fast. So we did some pickup work with the ship."

"Pickup?"

"We picked up a half ton of concentrates when the owner wasn't looking," Whitey explained. "Never mind where. The thing is, the stuff's hot. We had to have a place to let it cool till it was safe to cash in."

"So you put it in the drift?"

"You're clicking," Whitey approved. "So where were we when dear little Ruth lit on us? Up the creek. We couldn't get rid of her long enough to get the stuff moved out. She clung to us like grim death, ready to yell for the police the minute we turned our backs. If we didn't show her the layout we were sunk. If we did we were sunk. Got it now?"

Bill nodded with sardonic amusement and with inner relief. If Ruth hadn't been swindled, the biggest hurdle was past. What use these two vultures made of the drift was of no concern to Ruth, as Whitey had pointed out.

"So there's nothing in the drift, eh?"

"Oh no," Whitey said. "Just giant powder and tools."

Bill grinned sourly and turned away. He grasped the flashlight and rock hammer firmly, measuring the distance between the pontoon and the rocky margin.

"Make it snappy," Whitey warned. "I'll get your stuff over to the cabin, then wait for you here."

Bill leaped ashore. It gave him an odd feeling to walk through brittle frost and grinding shale. Sky travel was closed to him now, the trails of man remote. From this point on he was afoot in the Rockies.

He climbed up the long slope to the tailings, the sound of his progress raising up echoes from the towering walls. Ruth and Rocky were waiting at the mouth of the tunnel. He joined them there, puffing from the climb, and for a moment they stood silently, looking out over the lake. In midafternoon, by the clock, the sun was low in the southwest. Even the change in latitude was noticeable here; they were eight degrees of latitude closer to the Pole than at Boeing Field.

They were standing in sunlight, and a bar of radiance lay like a great wedge across the ice, its point on the gap. Otherwise the shadow of the great walls was upon the surface of the lake. Above, sheer and overpowering, the mountains flamed.

"It's beautiful in a cold, heartless sort of way," Ruth said. "Why isn't this bay frozen?"

"Springs underneath, I figure," Rocky replied. "She always freezes last."

Details about the mine entrance caught Bill's attention. They were standing on a species of platform comprised of broken rock packed firmly as pavement. This was usual; many tons of worthless rock had been trundled out here. A pathway had been worn down the slope at his right, at the base of the cliff, a footpath, paralleled by groups of heavy fragments, regularly spaced. From their appearance they had once supported a chute leading down to the water's edge. Some operation had gone on there, though no clue remained on the adjacent shelf as to what that operation was. The nearby water was black with depth.

There was one clue on the shelf itself: a dark splotch of oil that impregnated the rock. Some mechanical rig—gas-driven—had been in operation there. Why had all signs of this rig and the chute been removed so carefully?

"Let's go," Rocky said, his voice brittle. "Viewing the remains is always plumb depressing. You want me to go in with you?"

"Better wait here," Bill said.

Rocky nodded and turned up the collar of his Mackinaw about his ears. Ruth moved at once toward the tunnel's mouth. Bill went with her, aware of Rocky's expressionless but intent glance following him.

Inside the entrance he halted. "Wait here, Ruth. There's some data I forgot to get from Rocky."

He went back and stood close beside Rocky.

"Whitey gave me the dope on the drift. That's straight, is it?"

"You mean the loot we got cached there?" Rocky hunched his shoulders. "Yeah. I been ashamed to tell you, Bill. Kind of penny-ante business, ain't it?"

Bill gestured down the path. "What did you have down there—a little stamp mill, maybe?"

"Oh no," said Rocky with a raised eyebrow. "Just a mortar. We pounded out samples as we went along."

Bill nodded. He had found out what he wanted to know—and it was bad. Rocky was lying.

"Okay. We won't be long."

He turned away abruptly and joined Ruth. Together they moved into the tunnel. Looking back over his shoulder, just before the angle hid the ship from view, Bill saw that Whitey was already standing on a pontoon, tossing the equipment ashore.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN the light of day faded eerily Bill snapped on the flashlight, illuminating the cavern. The roof was a ragged arc above them, glistening with a thousand frost crystals. Vague contours merged into utter darkness ahead. The sound of their progress re-echoed through utter quiet.

Though the going was fairly even underfoot, Ruth clung to Bill's arm. He could feel her trembling a little.

"Cold?" he asked.

"And frightened," she said apologetically. "I've never been in a place like this before. It won't cave in on us?"

"No," he said. "It's safe."

He flashed the light from side to side and along the floor. The rock structure was broken by occasional seams. He paused at one of these, chipped off a sample, and was mildly surprised at the geological story it told. They were already past the igneous—it had merely been an outer sheath—and were piercing a dome. Anything could be encountered ahead. The litter on the floor,

spilled from whatever wheelbarrow or primitive tram that had been used to move out the debris, was of still different texture.

He picked up one of the latter fragments—a small piece no larger than the first joint of his thumb—hefted it, and paused to hold it close under the light. He got out his field glass and studied it minutely. Then he dropped it into his pocket and went on.

Ruth spoke in a hushed voice. "They *did* spend a lot of money here, didn't they?"

"Looks like it."

"More than one hundred thousand?"

"Could be."

They came to the walled-up entrance to the west drift. The main tunnel pierced on into the darkness. The heavily timbered door was at the right, and as he studied the wall there and to the left and in the semi-twilight beyond, Bill saw why they had tried here to pick up the lost seam. A major fault was in the structure ahead. They had gone on past the point of slip-page, then returned here, computed the probable angle, and pierced hopefully westward.

"Why have they got it locked up?" Ruth asked.

Bill pointed to the sign—BEWARE, EXPLOSIVES. "There's always a chance that someone would stumble in here. They've probably got their tools locked up in there too."

They went on, and the end was soon in sight: merely a dead end in black, unpromising rock. A drift led east-

ward, and Bill led the way to its end, but merely to complete the casual survey. He flashed the light around them and said: "Well, that's that."

As they went back she said in a low voice: "Bill . . ."

"Wait," he said.

When they came to the junction with the main tunnel he looked down toward the entrance. It seemed far in the distance. Rocky's figure was in silhouette against the blazing sunlight, squat and bulging. His back was to them, his face turned to the left. Watching Whitey returning from the cabin, Bill guessed.

Bill backed around the corner again, out of view should Rocky look in. "Okay," he said. "We're alone."

He looked down at her, but she averted her face quickly, at the same time turning toward him and clinging more tightly to his arm.

"Turn out the light," she said. "P-please."

He did so, aghast and stricken. They were in utter darkness. "It's no use," she said. "It's all—just like they said it was. My money's gone. . . . Isn't it?"

"Looks like it," he said.

She leaned against him in an oddly impersonal way. Like a child turning for comfort to the nearest strong support. "I don't do this often, Bill. I'm just not brave and casual, like you. I—I've got to cry."

He placed his left arm about her shoulders. She was still clinging to his right, and she pressed her face against it. No convulsions shook her; she was merely rigid, and he knew that if there were tears running

down her cheeks they were being forced out against her utmost will, one by one.

"Don't, Ruth," he said gently. "Look— isn't it only money you've lost?"

"It's my s-shirt," she said. "Isn't that what the gamblers say when they've lost everything?"

"Everything?" he repeated.

"I can tell you now," she said. "I didn't want to b-bias you before. . . . D'you mind?"

"No," he said. "Tell me."

He remembered a flat fragment of rock at the base of the wall behind him. He found it, seated himself there, and drew her down beside him. He leaned back against the wall, and she huddled in the crook of his shoulder, her hair soft against his jaw. *Here it is, Kennedy*, he thought. *Sweat blood*. . . .

"Proceed," he invited, smiling a little in the darkness. "You're not talking to a stranger. I'm a long ways from home myself."

It came with a rush. . . . She was a cheat, a crook, practically an embezzler. The money wasn't even hers; it belonged to two timid, mousy maiden aunts over at Victoria. They were dears, but like children in money matters. They'd turned over their entire capital to her, and she'd gone over to Vancouver to invest it for them. Seventy thousand in Dominion bonds, yielding meager interest. She'd been sure she could do better by them.

"Wasn't it eighty thousand?" Bill asked.

It was. She'd persuaded them to mortgage their home

for that last ten thousand. Her home. She'd lived with them since she was sixteen. They'd educated her, clothed her, even cashed some of their capital—an almost criminal gesture, in their view—to pay for her education abroad.

"We're talking turkey," Bill said. "Where's your slice of the MacRae millions?"

There wasn't any. Her father, the family ne'er-do-well, had gone through most of his inheritance fast. Malaria had done for him while on a big-game expedition in Africa. Her mother had died the next year, stony-broke. That had been two years after that summer at Shawnigan.

"Mother was awfully stiff-necked, bless her. She just couldn't live on the charity of Aunt Aggie and Aunt Beth. She was an Ormsby, you know. She'd always looked down on the MacRaes a little."

Bill held her closer to take the curse off it. "Not one of *us*, eh?"

She moved her head, as though trying to look up into his face. "*You* want me to eat crow too? Listen, then. . . . After that day we went canoeing at Shawnigan——"

"Skip it," he said. "There's no time now. This is brass tacks. . . . Where did you run across Rocky?"

She'd met him at the Exchange. His stock wasn't listed; he'd explained that he was looking for private capital. No use letting speculators in on anything as good as this. He'd shown her samples, assay reports,

painted a glowing picture of the huge body of ore up here at Luna Lake. Gold. Free milling. Surface outcroppings running hundreds to the ton. . . . He'd sounded so plausible.

"And now—this. I'd rather be shot than go back and face them. It's got to be done, though."

He fought an urge to tell her that there might still be a chance for salvage, for big winnings, even. It was only a hunch—yet. No use raising up new hopes until he was sure.

They sat for a moment in a silence broken only by the ticking of their watches. It was like a race. Her watch was the faster; it overhauled his; they ticked momentarily in unison, then hers hurried on. . . .

Rocky's voice reverberated in the tunnel. "Hey! You folks lost?"

"Coming," Bill said.

She pushed away from him briskly. "I'm feeling better. I've had my cry. Sorry. There isn't a soul I could talk to like that."

"It's all right." He gave her shoulder a little pat. "How are you, Ruth? It's been a pleasure to see you again."

She knew what he meant. When he turned on the flashlight, not directly on her, but illumining her face, she was smiling, though her long lashes were still wet.

They went back to the main tunnel. Rocky and Whitey were in silhouette at the entrance, waiting. When they came to the locked door Bill paused and

shone the light through a crack at the left, where the massive frame was a little away from the irregular contours of the rock. He could see tools leaning there—shovels, a crowbar, drills—but nothing more.

"What are you going to tell them?"

"I'm going to bring them in here and ask them one question," Bill said. "You'll wait outside. When we come out be ready to follow my lead. No matter what it is, do as I say."

They walked slowly toward the entrance. She whispered: "You mean there *is* something funny here?"

"I suspect it. One joker. And if it's here it isn't funny."

Light strengthened about them. The sunlight, when they emerged, was momentarily blinding. Ruth got a pair of goggles from her coat pocket and put them on; they also hid her eyes from close scrutiny. Bill looked about him, blinking.

"Well?" Whitey demanded. He seemed casual, but Bill noted the pinched, formidable set of his lips. "What's the verdict, Professor?"

"Step back to the drift with me a second. D'ye mind, Ruth?"

"It's all right," she said. She had her compact out and was powdering her nose. "I'll wait here."

"We take off in fifteen minutes," Whitey said.

Bill led the way back, with Rocky at his elbow and Whitey walking close behind. It reminded Bill, somehow, of that night—it was only *last* night—when he

had descended from De Silva's with Red Schafer breathing on his neck. Forces more menacing than Schafer's brute strength were striding with him now. And greater stakes impended.

"Did he get my trail outfit moved over, Rocky?"

"Yeah. It's all cached in the cabin."

They paused at the door, and Bill turned the flashlight on the padlock. It was of the heaviest type, hanging from a hasp and staple bolted firmly through the four-inch planking.

"Which one of you boys is carrying the key?"

"I am," Whitey said. He shifted his position to face Bill squarely, his eyes narrowing.

"We don't have to show Ruth the concentrates," Bill said. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her. Let me see the stuff. Yes?"

"No," Whitey said. He was standing with his hands in his side pockets, and he kept them there, waiting.

Bill looked at Rocky. "You had a stamp mill out there by the tailings."

Rocky stared at him, the whites of his eyes glistening. "There wasn't any stamp mill."

Bill took the fragment of ore from his pocket, hefted it, then handed it to Rocky. "D'you call that a concentrate? Or a nice chunk of high-grade?"

Rocky hefted the sample automatically. A touch of horror was in his quick glance. "Judas!" he said, almost in a whisper. "You determined to cut your own throat, boy? Look—before you go clean off the deep end——"

But Whitey cut in: "No—the hell with it. . . . All right, Kennedy. We struck it. We came up to freight our stuff out. There was some giant left, so we put in a last shot for percentage—and hit the jack pot. So what?"

CHAPTER XII

BILL GOT OUT A CIGARETTE and lighted it, broke the match, and tossed it away. The interval gave him time to think, his lips pursed in a silent whistle. He had had a hunch from the moment he had suspected Rocky of lying about the stamp mill. This was certainty, and the ramifications of it were growing by the minute.

They hadn't swindled Ruth. There were no stolen concentrates behind this door. There *was* a body of high-grade ore of unknown dimensions.

"How big is it? How wide is the vein?"

"It don't amount to much," Rocky said hastily. "It's just——"

"Shut up," Whitey said. "Your bag of tricks is empty, old son. . . . Call it a pocket, Kennedy. Call it millions. It doesn't change the deal. Have you given Ruth any hint of it?"

"No."

"That gives you both an outside chance," Whitey said. He indicated the fragment in Rocky's hand.

"That's float. You just happened to drop it here, eh, Rocky?"

"Yeah, I lost it out of my pocket. I shore did. It's float."

"When we get outside drop it in the lake. So here it is, Kennedy. Just a legitimate hard-rock prospect. It cost better than a hundred grand, but it blew up. It's tough on Ruth. It's tough on the other stockholders. But that's the way of it. You'll sell her that theory and make it good. Correct?"

Bill inhaled deeply on his cigarette, debating his play. No use attempting now to follow his original plan: tell Ruth privately, verbally, what the true situation was. With the stakes on the table, this pair would permit no private word with her. There was only one way left to warn her.

"Correct," he said. "Let's go."

Whitey eyed him unwinkingly as they started back.

"Just like that, eh?"

Bill nodded. "It won't be hard. She already thinks she's lost out."

"That's fine," Whitey said. He brought out a sheaf of papers from an inner pocket and riffled through them.

"Because she signs off here."

"Here?"

"Before we start out. On top of that, she'll have to convince me, prove to me, that there'll be no squawks after she reaches Prince Rupert. She reneged on us once. This time the deal's clean."

Bill walked slower in thoughtful pose, head lowered. No chance to talk to Ruth. . . He stopped and ground his cigarette beneath his heel.

"Ruth doesn't know I'm staying behind. She'll want to know why."

Whitey said: "So?"

"So you'll tell her, Rocky. After you've taken off. Do it this way. You get her aboard, Whitey, ready to go. Rocky and I'll lag behind. Then Rocky dashes aboard and you're off. Right away Rocky can start explaining." Bill's lips twisted a little. "He's good at that."

"Like a blacksmith," said Rocky gloomily.

Whitey said, to Bill's inner relief: "Okay. Let's get out of here."

They went on out into the sunlight. Ruth had descended the tailings on an angle to the left and was standing on the crest of the ridge. She was like a little soldier in silhouette against the lake. Sunlight was upon her, and the great bar of sunlight through the gap had swung more obliquely toward the east; otherwise the lake and great walls were in deepening shadow. The orchestration of the wind was louder in the crags above, and the air had teeth in it.

They came down to her, and she turned to them entirely composed. Her momentary weakness a memory now, she bore herself with a calm, resolute air.

Bill kept it casual, kept the desperate heartache and hunger from his eyes when he looked at her. This moment represented his last with Ruth MacRae.

He said: "We're about to take off now. If you feel like it you might apologize to these boys. *I* thought they were crooks too."

"Right," she said. She didn't look at Whitey but squarely at Rocky. "Sorry."

"Do you happen to have your stock certificates, receipts, and what not with you?"

She nodded, thrusting her hand into one bulging pocket.

"Let's see them, please."

She took out a heavy envelope and handed it to him. He opened it and took out a stock certificate, beautifully engraved, and four assessment receipts.

"Might as well tear them up," Bill said. "Better still, burn them."

He had noticed that both certificate and receipts had been recorded. The recorder's stamps were upon all. Though she didn't know it, destroying the originals was merely an impressive gesture.

"You burn them," she said.

He struck a match and burned the stock certificate first. She watched him, her face pale but smiling a little. "Sixty thousand," she said when the ashes fell to the ground. He burned the assessment receipts, and she said: "Twenty thousand—including a mortgage." When the flames had died she said, with a Continental lift of the shoulders: "*Finis!*"

"*Tout finis,*" Bill agreed. "Now we'll wind it all up. Whitey's got a release for you to sign."

She took pen and paper from Whitey, read the release, then spread it against her knee and signed it. It brought a tightness to Bill's throat that she should accept his direction so blindly and implicitly.

It also sold Whitey on the completeness of her surrender. "No more squawks at Prince Rupert, then?"

She gave him a brief glance but made no reply.

"Righto," Whitey said, showing his teeth at Bill. "We're off. Two minutes should warm the motor."

Ruth started toward the ship with him but halted when she saw that Rocky and Bill stood fast on the ridge. Bill waved her on. "We'll be along in a minute."

"No more than two," Whitey said. "We're cutting this thin."

Ruth hesitated, looking up into Bill's face, then turned and went on. Whitey took her arm to help her over the uneven footing. For an instant Bill stood looking after her. This was good-by. He had found and lost her in a matter of minutes. It was like seeing an empty canvas glow with light and life and splendid promise and die again.

He turned away quickly, motioning to Rocky. The ridge soon hid her, the ship, and the bay from view.

Once fully in the clear Bill halted by a clump of bushes that all but surrounded a huge, flat-topped fragment of rock. He placed a foot on the edge of this fragment, rested an elbow on his knee, and looked at Rocky. Rocky looked back, his jaw projecting and brows lowered.

Bill continued to look at him steadily, through a sustained, bitter silence. Rocky called on all his battle-worn tricks to maintain his truculent front. He pulled his hat lower over his eyes with a defiant gesture, produced his plug of tobacco, bit into it viciously. His teeth clenched on his chew.

But his bluff failed, moment by moment, and suddenly he was broken and ashamed. Or appeared to be. One never knew.

"Don't you look at me that-a-way, Bill."

Bill said: "We drank together last night. You said: 'Sleep sound, Hod. Where there ain't any frost and the wind don't blow.' What kind of a bluff was that?"

Rocky cringed, looking away. "That's a foul holt, son. It's the only way you can reach me where I'm plumb unprotected. Don't you bear down."

"What's in the air?" Bill insisted. "A touch of frost, maybe? What's blowing up there in the pinnacles?"

"Give it a name," Rocky pleaded, clasping and unclasping his bony hands. "I've figured and figured, and I'm out of my depth. Can't you see how Whitey's had me over a barrel? *I* wanted to split with her. This here's clean money—honest money. Our cut would have made us well fixed. Clean money, by the eternal! But no, Whitey's had a taste of the meat. He's never been this close to millions, and he's plumb crazy."

"Millions, eh?"

"I've seen that stuff over at Yellowknife," Rocky said huskily. "This here's more and better. The grand-

daddy of all pockets, and you can pry out the pay with a toothpick. . . . D'ye know why I drug you into this, Bill? It was on your account as well as hers. I figured——"

"Skip it," Bill said. There was no time to listen to Rocky's devious excuses. "What's Whitey got on you?"

Rocky hesitated. "Plenty."

"Enough to put you behind bars?"

"Yeah."

"And you've got enough on him to put him behind bars? Outside of this deal?"

Rocky looked about him cautiously. As though to reassure him that they were utterly alone, the distant motor roared thunderously into life.

"Enough to hang him," he said. "A knifing scrape over east of the mountains. His name ain't Bodine. The Mounties'll never give up. He knows it. We figured to work this pocket this winter, cash in, and head south. Then the gal——"

"Listen," Bill said sternly. "You can still pay off. You can still copper Ruth's bets. That's all I ask. It'll cost you plenty."

"Try me," Rocky challenged. "I'll go the limit. Give it a name."

"It's simple. When you get to Prince Rupert tonight tell her the truth. There *is* a mine. Give her all the dope you've got on Whitey. Tell her to turn him over to the Provincial Police—quick."

"It would have to be quick," Rocky said. "Then what happens to Rocky Flynn?"

"Follow your own hunch. If money can get you out of whatever Whitey hangs on you, you'll have it. Ruth will see that you get your share. Otherwise, fade from the picture."

"I'll have to fade," Rocky said. "Once this busts wide open I'm done for." It seemed to Bill, for a savagely cynical moment, that Rocky's eagerness had chilled the instant it was suggested that he, personally, foot the bill. Yet his bleached eyes were merely intent, touched with a species of bitter awe. "So you want me to play my last ace?"

"I've played mine," Bill said, watching him. "I might get out of here alive. I might not. . . . Wasn't there a squaw waiting for you up Fort Nelson way? Up along the Dease, where even the Mounties could never run you down?"

Rocky nodded and spat reflectively. "Name of Luna. A good trapper and wood splitter. But a long ways from them marble halls. . . ."

"Well?" Bill said.

Rocky turned away and walked up and down, hands clasped together and shoulders bowed a little. He stood for an instant with his back to Bill, looking out over the lake toward the gap. Sunlight fringed his upturned collar, glinted on the shank of an ancient fishhook in the crown of his battered hat.

When he turned back his shoulders were more erect. The bitter lines of his face had softened a little.

"Okay, Bill. I'll do 'er."

Bill silently extended his hand, and Rocky gripped it, blinking.

Over the ridge the idling motor roared up suddenly, peremptorily—an obvious command for haste—then died again.

"Look," Rocky said hurriedly. He produced a huge roll of bills and divided it roughly in half. "You'll need a little capital. There's half the five grand I took off Red Schafer. Don't you argue, now. It's yours. Red stole it off your dad."

Bill took it with a mirthless smile. It was the first time Rocky had admitted that he had rolled Red Schafer.

"There's one more chore you've got to do, Rocky. Tell Ruth all about me. I'm a murderer, a wanted man. Above all, sell her on the theory that she'll never see me again. She can't. She won't want to, if you do the job right."

"Yes, she will," said Rocky. "She'll be back looking for you."

"She won't find me. She'll find a note up there in the tunnel. A confession. And a sign-off. The note will say that I'm not even going to try to get out of here. The hell with it. If the authorities want to find my body they can drag the lake. That's for the police as well as Ruth. It wipes the slate clean."

"Don't you even want me to leave her a pinch of hope? She loves you, son. I seen it in her eyes."

"No," said Bill harshly. "She remembers a boy she knew once. *I'm* a stranger to her. . . . That's all, Rocky." He waved Rocky on with a kind of desperation. Once the ship was gone it would be too late for debate. "Good luck along the Dease, old son."

Rocky ascended the ridge. He waved to the hidden ship and stood a moment, scratching his head. He looked up at the sky, out across the lake, kicked aimlessly at a fragment underfoot.

Then he jammed his hat low, nodded briefly to Bill, and strode down and out of sight.

Bill stood there, listening. It seemed a long time before they got away—long, dragging minutes. Presently the motor roared on a powerful, sustained note. He could imagine the ship's maneuvers: wheeling, swinging back into the bay for the farthest foot of take-off.

The motor roared again, wide open. Bill stepped back into the protection of the brush and stood motionless there. The ship shot into view like a javelin, planing on its pontoons. Just at the edge of the ice it was in the clear; it rose like a gull, pitching in the air currents. . . . No, Whitey was dipping its wings in hard-bitten, sardonic farewell.

The roar of it filled the whole lake. The graceful bulk of the ship dwindled toward the gap, plunged through it, dropped down and was gone.

Bill came out of hiding and stood by the rock, listening to the dwindling drone of the motor. The echoes seemed to shuttle from the peaks in the remote distance. Presently there was only the sound of the waterfall beyond the gap and the eternal sighing of the wind overhead.

The flashlight bulked in his left pocket. He got it out, looked at it, and put it back again. The rock hammer lay on the slab beside him. He took it up, hefted it aimlessly, and tossed it down. The metallic sound of it rang across the lake and echoed there.

He turned abruptly and strode up the bay toward the cabin, his head bowed. He was soon in the scrub timber, following a path lined with strips of ancient bark and weathered chips. Apathetically he noted the stumps near by: the logs for the cabin had been hewn here. Autumn leaves lay underfoot, crisp with frost. It seemed to be colder here, close to the blue-white wall of the glacier.

The cabin was a mere log-walled box with a blunt stone chimney at the far end. The door was open, and he could see his sleeping bag and part of his packsack inside on the dusty floor. He could see the vague outline of a single bunk built against the wall on the right. A box stove was in the center, a rusty stovepipe leading to the chimney.

He paused, with his foot on the threshold, and looked up past the corner of the shake roof toward the glacier. The rough wall of blue-white ice was wedged between

two great shoulders of rock. It was sheer on the right, across the bay, but on the left a crumbled moraine led up into the heights. That would be his trail tomorrow—or whenever the storm blew over.

He stepped across the threshold, and the chill of the abandoned cabin smote him. Might as well build a fire, he decided; get the place warmed up. If there was a storm he would stay here and wait it out. He would stay overnight in any event, rest up, eat hearty, and start out fresh. He was tired, tired of body and soul.

. . .

He was squatting beside his equipment and for the first time became aware of its meager bulk. There were no rifle and scabbard, no ammunition. He rolled the sleeping bag over, took up the folded tarp and put it down again, shook the packsack and peered into it. It was entirely empty.

He looked about him and was merely puzzled at first. Where had Whitey put the rest of the stuff? The bunk held nothing but its mattress of flattened spruce boughs. On the shelf at the left was a debris of useless objects: a tea can, two tin cups, a glass jar partly filled with matches, a sway-backed bar of soap. On the floor was an ancient bucket and teakettle without a handle. In the corner behind the door stood a rough chair with crossed legs and box-wood seat and back. The other corner was empty.

The impact of it came home slowly. He got to his feet and leaned against the doorframe, looking down

at the sleeping bag, the new, crisp tarp and flat pack-sack. It was a death sentence written there. No rifle, no ammunition, no grub. . . . *You don't have to run a bluff at disappearing now, Kennedy*, he thought. *This is it—the spot marked X.*

He lighted a cigarette and puffed slowly. It might have been sheer apathy, the letdown from the previous twenty-four hours of stress, but he felt no thrill of dismay. He was merely touched with somber amusement—at himself, at the simple, childlike manner in which he had permitted Whitey to stage this coup. Rocky had no part in it; he was certain of that. It was Whitey's idea. His, Bill's, usefulness was done. Even with grub, his chances of reaching the east fork were slim. Without grub they were nil. Why complicate matters by permitting him even an outside chance?

How it had been done was obvious: the stuff hadn't even left Prince Rupert. Whitey had performed this sleight of hand while trimming ship at the dock, just before they had taken off. He had been alone in the freight compartment. He had unloaded the big dunnage bag on the old-timer's shoulders—the moorage man—and the old-timer had staggered away under its weight. There was reason for it: a rifle and scabbard, ammunition, and forty-odd pounds of grub had been in the bag. Since then nobody had given it a thought. Even Rocky, watching from the tunnel a while ago, had been sure that Whitey was taking *all* the equipment over to the cabin.

But what larger scheme had germinated in Whitey's mind even before they had left Prince Rupert? Whitey must have been certain, beyond possibility of doubt, that neither he nor anybody else would return to Luna Lake for months, perhaps not until spring. Otherwise, this gesture would fail. A man sheltered and warm, though without food, could actually exist here for weeks. He would be bound to leave a written record behind him, telling the circumstances under which he had passed on. Whitey must have been entirely sure, in his own mind, that the first and only person to return to Luna Lake—next spring or whenever—would be Whitey Bodine.

In that event, what about Rocky? And Ruth? How, in his devious planning, did Whitey propose to eliminate them? He was playing a lone hand and he was in too deep now to withdraw. Once in the air, his two passengers were utterly at his mercy. He didn't even have to return to Prince Rupert. He could set down somewhere in the wilds, an alleged forced landing . . .

Bill snapped his cigarette upon the cold hearth and pushed away from the doorframe. The ship was gone, and each turn of its propeller was taking it farther away. Whatever problems it bore were now utterly beyond his reach. However dark his forebodings about Ruth might be, he could not help her now. Further speculation must wait beyond an immediate and necessary chore: build a fire, warm up the cabin. At least—

for what it was worth in enabling him even to speculate—he must have heat.

He tossed the sleeping bag on the bunk, kicked the tarp and packsack aside, and turned to the stove. Charred fragments were in it. He whittled shavings, piled splinters and more wood upon them, and knelt and lighted them. The stove smoked a little after its door was closed. Still kneeling, he cleared away some of the ashes to make a draft.

The cabin door, directly behind him, faced southwest. Sunlight did not shine directly upon it, but it was a source of brightness in the cabin. It seemed to Bill, as he waited for the flames to take hold, that that brightness faded momentarily. The rough threshold creaked.

He twisted his body and looked over his shoulder. Then he came up to his feet without conscious effort and faced toward the door, gripped by complete amazement and disbelief.

Ruth was standing there, leaning against the door-frame, her hands thrust deep into her pockets. She was watching him smilingly. Her pose was nonchalant, but about her—in the almost defiant tilt of her head, her hopeful manner of studying his expression—was the air of a truant child none too sure how stern its welcome will be.

He stared at her, his astonishment engulfed by instant dismay.

"Ruth! You didn't leave with the ship?"

"Obviously not. We had a bit of an argument, and I—I preferred to jog along with you." Her smile was a little tremulous. Some late horror had left a touch of shadow in her eyes. "Sorry to intrude, and all that."

He was still gripping the stick with which he had been poking the fire. He tossed it down, dusted his hands, and crossed over to lean against the door opposite her.

She met his gaze squarely. "Please don't scold me. They said some terrible things about you, but I *know* how dangerous they are—now. I'm sorry. I had no choice, really. I'll only be here until tomorrow, you know."

"Tomorrow? You mean they're coming back?"

"Definitely not. *They* won't be back at all. They plan to maroon us here until spring. They're quite sure we'll both be done for by then."

"Rocky agreed to that?" said Bill, aghast.

"Certainly. He said you'd understand that this had become entirely too complicated, that when the last pinch came he must look out for Rocky Flynn. You know his quaint way of expression. Does that surprise you?"

"It does," said Bill grimly. "Then Rocky knows we have no grub?"

She nodded. "He even congratulated Whitey for thinking of such a foul plot. They don't know, of course"—she patted her pocket—"that I've still got those four sandwiches."

Bill stared at her. *Four sandwiches*. What was back of this simple-minded, almost flippant confidence? Upon what miracle was she depending?

He remembered, just as she put it into words, and his skin crawled.

"And they don't know, fortunately," she went on, "about that letter I wrote to the Provincial Police down at Prince Rupert. They'll be flying over here tomorrow, looking for us. You can wait here to welcome them—or hurry on, as you please. I don't mean to disturb your plans. I suppose, since you haven't food, that you'll be obliged to wait."

There was no help for it. There was no use trying to avoid it or soften the blow. He reached into his coat and into his shirt pocket and brought out a sealed, stamped envelope addressed to the Provincial Police.

He held it up in the fading light so she could see it fully.

"You're referring to this letter, I suppose?" he asked.

CHAPTER XIII

SHE TOOK THE LETTER from his hand and held it closer. It was plain that she couldn't at first grasp what had happened. Her glance up into his face showed complete disbelief.

"But I *saw* you mail it!"

"You thought you did," he corrected. "I had another envelope ready and slipped it into the box. Just a little sleight of hand. Like Whitey short-changing me on the grub."

It was by far the most embarrassing moment of his life. And the most savagely humiliating. In all his contacts with her from the first—from their first meeting at the Seattle airport—he had tried to forestall any such debacle as this. He had steeled himself against her in the tunnel, when she had been in his arms. She had hurt him once. Never again, through any word or act of his, would he lay himself open to her scorn and disdain.

Yet here it was, and he was utterly defenseless.

He turned to the stove, on the pretense that it

needed attention. He slid back the movable top and thrust in more wood. The cheerful fire roared, its light flickering on the cobwebbed rafters overhead.

"Better come in and close the door," he told her. "It's a touch drafty outside."

He heard the door close and her uncertain step cross the room. The bunk creaked. He kept his back to her while he adjusted the damper. Then he turned to the corner, dragged the rough chair forward, and placed it near the stove. He took off his helmet and struck the seat of the chair smartly. "Dust," he explained. "It gathers fast in an empty cabin."

He unbuttoned his leather jacket, backed up to the stove, planted himself there, and looked at her fully for the first time.

She was seated on the edge of the bunk, the letter in her folded hands. She seemed frail and small in her engulfing coat. There was but one cobwebbed window at the right of the door, and the light was dim. Her face was pale, her eyes dark and lustrous.

"Then you *are* a criminal? Wanted by the Seattle police and all that?"

"Who told you that?" he countered, still clutching at shreds and tatters of inner fortitude.

"Whitey first. Then Rocky admitted it. I didn't believe it—playing the fool, as usual. It's all true, then?"

"That's right."

She looked at him wonderingly and about the cabin. She looked at the stove, the grimy shelves, twisted to

appraise the equipment on the bunk. "You planned all this from the first?"

"Not this way," he said. "I thought you'd be safely back in Prince Rupert tonight. The letter wouldn't affect you."

She turned the letter over and over in her hands, then opened it and read it slowly. "Then you'll find this amusing, I'm sure," she said, holding it out. "Read it, please."

He did so and was plunged deeper into an abyss of shame. The brief note made no mention of him at all. It merely reported to the Provincial Police that she was accompanying Messrs. Bodine and Flynn on a flight to the Rockies north of Jasper. It was a hazardous trip. In the event they didn't return that night, the terrain should be searched east of the Finlay and south of Sifton Pass.

"It's water over the dam now," he said grimly, handing it back. "Sorry. It *was* a hazardous trip."

"I was partly responsible, of course," she said. "I led you to think I was telling them all about you. Actually I was sure there was nothing wrong. It seems incredible still—naïve as I am." She slid the letter into her pocket. "D'you mind telling me about yourself? You *are* Bill Kennedy?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, Ruth." He gestured about him with a mirthless smile. "And I live here. . . ."

"I'm not trying to humiliate you—if that's possible,"

she said, looking up at him steadily. "Please extend me the same courtesy. . . . Go on, please."

"Very well." There was but one thing to be done: hew to the line.

He told her the whole story from the moment he had arrived at the Denby, in Seattle, from Sumpter Valley. He did it matter-of-factly, hiding nothing, coloring nothing. It came hard, but not as hard as he had feared. Facts were facts. From rock bottom all directions were up. He described the killing in the alley, his flight, the manner in which Rocky had guided him to the Seattle airport. He placed no blame on Rocky, made no excuses for himself.

He brought the record up to the preceding hour. He had been certain of the existence of the mine only at the last. There had been no chance to tell her then. It would have been dangerous to do so. Most imperative was to get her safely back to Prince Rupert. Rocky would give her the whole picture later.

"And that's that," he concluded. "Such as it is, there it is. It isn't pretty."

She was sitting more rigidly upright on the edge of the bunk. "You burned up my stock certificates. Why?"

"Just to impress Whitey. They were recorded, so it didn't mean anything. Your lawyer would have told you that."

"But what was supposed to happen to you? I mean after we'd all left?"

"I might make it over to the east fork. I might not. . . . I was going to sign off here." He explained how: the burning of the cabin, the remains of the rifle in the ashes, the suicide note. "It sounds theatrical. This way's much simpler—as Whitey probably figured out. Sorry you're in on it."

She looked at him steadily, her long-lashed eyes wide and imperious. "Do you expect me to believe all this?"

"I expect nothing. Believe all of it, part of it, or none of it. Remember, you asked me."

"You mean you actually have no food?"

"We haven't. Yes—four sandwiches."

"And Rocky won't—nor Whitey—nobody'll be back for us?"

"I don't know. It depends on how valuable the mine is, what the stakes are. Probably not, though."

"And we can't make our way out on foot?"

"Not without food."

She got up abruptly and made her way to the door. She found the latch and leaned there for a moment, then faced him again. "But what's to become of us?"

He shrugged. "I haven't thought it out yet. At least we've got a roof over us. We won't freeze. We're not hungry—yet." He saw, with a pang of pity, that belated facts were hitting her, head on. "Easy, Ruth. Just take off your coat and relax. We'll do some figuring and see what adds up."

He had said the wrong thing, apparently. She opened

the door. "I think I'll take a turn outside. Sort of—pull myself together. . . ."

He did not follow her. Some crises of life—he was facing one himself—must be met alone. He listened to her hurrying up the path toward the ridge, her footfalls crackling in the frost. The sound of it soon dwindled and merged into the strengthening whisper of the wind about the eaves.

He busied himself about the cabin, yielding to a desperate urge to be doing something. It helped dim the sense of helplessness, of being entrapped, that had come with the knowledge that there was no grub. The dilemma was thrice compounded now. With Ruth on his hands—empty-handed, without even a trail outfit—where did they go from here?

Might as well make the place livable, meanwhile: tidy it up.

He went outside, cut some spruce boughs, and bound them together into a primitive broom. He saw that plenty of wood had been cut during the summer, a considerable pile ricked up between two trees. That was on the credit side. Misty, wind-driven streamers hung suspended from the towering crests to the east. Even if there were no storm tonight, there would be bitter frost abroad on the lake. At least they had shelter.

He swept out the cabin, stood the broom in the corner, and took inventory of the few battered utensils that Rocky and Whitey and whatever hard-rock crew had bivouacked here had left behind. There was the

bucket, teakettle, tin cups, a motley array. A square can on the shelf held perhaps a half cup of black tea. Also, tucked into the corner, was the remains of a coil of stove wire used to anchor the rusty pipe to the ceiling.

In addition to the tea, the wire was a find of proportions. It instantly suggested a possible means of opening the locked door that guarded the mine. The value of the mine was the crux of the whole situation; a mere glimpse of the deposit would answer many questions.

Might as well explore it now, he decided. It was time to check on Ruth, in any event. First, he took the battered bucket, went down to the water's edge, broke the ice, and came back with water. He put it on to boil. Nothing would bolster Ruth's courage more than hot tea.

Then he thrust the coil into his pocket, took the flashlight and rock hammer, and headed for the ridge.

She was nowhere in sight when he emerged from the scrub timber. The ridge was empty. From this point, with the open water of the west bay hidden, the frozen surface of the lake gave the final touch to a picture of lifeless and static solitude. The sky was still bright in the west, but the towering walls were black with shadow. There was no movement other than his own, no sound except that of the wind and the distant waterfall.

Then, hurrying around the headland, he saw her up

at the mine entrance, motionless as the rock at her back. She was leaning beside the tunnel, hands thrust deep in her pockets, looking out over the bay to the west. Except for turning her face toward him, she did not move as he mounted up the tailings toward her.

He came up to her, puffing, and found her as composed and calm as when he had first met her at Boeing Field. Her head was up, her turban meticulously in place. Through some inner magic, plus a touch of make-up, no sign of weakness or tears showed on her firmly molded, almost haughty features.

"I want to take a quick look at the mine," he told her. He showed her the coil of wire. "Maybe we can break in. Then we'd better dash back to the cabin. I found some tea up on the shelf."

She smiled wanly. "Just tea? No lemon?"

"Good!" he approved. "We've met the enemy and they are ours, eh?"

She made no reply. As the blackness of the tunnel engulfed them and he snapped on the light she did not take his arm but marched stolidly beside him. When he came to the timbered door he handed her the flashlight:

"Hold it, please. Shine it on the crack—here, between the rock and the timber."

She held the flashlight as directed, and he crouched at the crack, peering in. The crowbar was leaning against the jagged wall inside. He gauged the distance, straightened out the wire, and formed a hook on the

end. "The idea is we'll fish out that bar—maybe. Then pry off the padlock."

Upsetting the crowbar was easy; it crashed and lay prone, the sound of it re-echoing in the cavern. Fortunately the small end was toward him. He formed a triple loop on the end of the wire, its coils distended so that it would tighten and cling to the end of the bar, if and when he could snare it.

It took considerable maneuvering. He inched the wire in with utmost patience, easing the coil over the roughness of the floor. Finally it was in position. He wormed it over the end of the bar and cautiously drew the wire tight. The coil clamped on some tiny roughness on the surface of the metal and hung on.

He dragged the bar toward him slowly, got the end of it through the crack, finally was able to grasp it. He dragged it out until the swelling metal caught in the crack. By standing up and applying his full weight to it, thrusting it back and forth, he was able to drag it out.

The rest was easy. He inserted the beveled end of the bar into the staple that held the padlock and heavy hasp in place. Under his full weight, magnified many times by the short fulcrum, the heavy metal parted. The lock fell away. He took the flashlight from her, laid hold on the door, and swung it open.

The dead air of the drift smote them. The odor of ancient powder smoke clung to the arched rock. Bill went in cautiously. There might be giant powder or

caps in the debris of boxes and tools that cluttered the entrance. The boxes were empty. They came to a hand mortar and a small tank that brimmed with water from a tiny but persistent seepage overhead.

Bill studied this layout with understanding eyes. Many clues told him what Whitey and Rocky had done here. After making their discovery they had been like small boys cooking their first outdoor meal—unable to wait until the potatoes were fried and the steak well done. They had pounded out high-grade in the mortar, washed it by hand. It must be free-milling quartz, “rotten” with gold.

It was. When they came to the end of the drift and he turned his light full on the face of the cut there was new radiance in the cavern. The vein was thick as a man’s body, spangled and permeated with a lacy pattern that seemed black by contrast with the whiteness of the quartz. It was not black, but yellow: a hard-rock miner’s dream. The gold was visible to the eye.

It was no mere pocket, moreover; no Comstock “bonanza.” It was a true stratum that angled up across the face of the cut and so into the heart of the mountain. Its thickness was obvious; its depth could only be surmised. The veriest tyro would have recognized it as a huge concentration, with values running thousands to the ton.

That’s that, Bill thought with a deep, somber thrill. *We walk out—or die*. Few men could look upon such wealth unmoved. It was that way with raw gold. Many

would go to great lengths, any length, to control it. Near the end of that list—"way back and down"—was the name of Rocky Flynn.

He glanced at Ruth and found her studying him, her face expressionless.

"There it is," he said. "Any question?"

"Just one. It's quite valuable?"

"Millions, probably."

Her manner of accepting this showed that her speculations had traveled as swiftly—if not as far—as his own. "Shall we barge along? You mentioned a spot of tea."

"Right," he agreed. "The water's probably boiling."

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE WAY BACK TO THE CABIN, pondering what he had seen, Bill had his moment of complete dismay. It was on Ruth's account. Up to the instant when he had glimpsed the mine, personal angles had outweighed all else: how to justify his past actions in her eyes, save face, armor himself against her critical appraisal of his motives. The trivia, not the realities, of their predicament.

Blunt facts had now emerged from those inconsequential mists. They had no food. They were separated from life by bitter, stamina-devouring miles of mountain travel. Empty-handed as she was, with no trail equipment other than the clothes she wore, she could not go far afoot. With a storm imminent she shouldn't even leave the shelter of the cabin. Whitey and Rocky—only living persons who knew of their presence here—had obviously gambled huge stakes that no outside rescue would reach them. . . . What was the answer?

There was but one, and it was unescapable. His in-

stant of panic faded when the course became clear, plainly marked. Granting that Rocky himself would not return—and no clue had developed as yet to support that forlorn hope—there was no alternative. Ruth was entirely helpless as far as overland travel was concerned. Yet she could exist for days in the shelter of the cabin. Weeks, even. For him to do likewise, waiting for slow death with folded hands, was unthinkable.

Therefore, he must strike out at once for the east fork: food or no food, chance or no chance. Tonight, and alone.

It had to be tonight, after a few preliminary chores: bring in plenty of wood; explain the grim facts to Ruth; have their spot of tea. An hour hence, with the moon strengthening over the mighty eastern ramparts, the snow fields would be almost as bright as day. It might be hours before the threatened storm broke, if at all. Those hours, in the dim, stumbling, reeling home stretch, might be the essential margin.

The cabin was squat and gloomy in the deepening shadows. He led the way past it and into the timber. "We're monarchs of all we survey," he said over his shoulder. "Let's take a quick look at the glacier. And the north bank."

They went through a small man-made clearing where considerable stovewood was ricked between two trees. He had seen it before, while making his broom, and he appraised it now with new satisfaction. Such as it was,

there was Ruth's insurance against any storm. The timber thinned out at the foot of a vast moraine that sloped down from the north shoulder of the glacier. He paused there and flashed his light toward the sky.

Up yonder was the only way out afoot: along the crest of the rim to the left, then north past the base of a towering escarpment, and so out upon the open, unprotected face of the mountain. What waited there was hidden from this point. The far, turbulent miles to the east fork were hidden.

It came to Bill, facing realities on his own account, that his only knowledge of that terrain had come from Rocky Flynn. Rocky had said sketchily, in their hotel room at Prince Rupert: "It's maybe sixty miles, as the snow flies. But what miles! And you won't be flying, son." The trail might actually be impassable afoot. Even at that point, that early in the game, Rocky might have planned to copper all bets.

And still, in the end, that was the only way out.

He turned the flashlight briefly up to the face of the glacier, and a hundred crevasses and vertical grooves of ice threw back a gloomy reflection. There was something symbolic about this dead, static monster. Its bulk, plainly enough, had once choked the entire bowl as far as the gap, and through countless centuries, grudging inch by inch, its face had sloughed off under the erosion of wind, sun, and storm. Except for the scrub spruce, willows, and the spongy turf underfoot, it appeared that nothing that moved, breathed, or took root had

followed its retreat. There were probably no fish in the chill lake, since the waterfall choked migration upstream. There was no clue that any sort of wild life had ever roamed this lost patch of timber.

"Okay," he said, turning back. "We've seen it."

Darkness was deepening fast. The weight of what lay ahead was growing by the minute. It came to Bill with an overwhelming rush of pity for her that Ruth would bear the greater load. Of the separate trails both must follow hers was by far the more formidable. He would be struggling on hour by hour, the physical battle of it dimming the knowledge that even his greatest effort was probably hopeless. She could do nothing but wait. Wait through interminable days and lonely, terrifying nights.

How best prepare her, spiritually, for such a haul? To leave her with complete despair in her heart was unthinkable. But was it right, was it fair, to bolster her resolution with utterly false hope?

As they crossed the clearing and came into the shadows by the cabin he grasped her arm to help her over the rough going. It was merely a courteous, protective gesture, in line with his aching thoughts. She wrenched herself free, an almost desperate reflex. She shrank away from him, beyond arm's length and farther. She was backing up the path that led toward the open ridge.

He halted at once and leaned against the corner of

the cabin, his back to the rough logs. She halted, too, facing him, but poised for instant flight.

"Easy, Ruth," he said gently. This was by far the most disheartening thing that had happened to him at Luna Lake. "We're in this together. Don't be afraid of *me*."

"Sorry I'm so jumpy," she said. "Just—don't touch me." Her hands came together and entwined. "This is all quite impossible, of course."

"Let's discuss it inside. It's too cold here." He extended the flashlight. "Take this." When she made no move he tossed it down at her feet. Because he was so deeply touched, his voice was brusque. "Pick it up. Turn it on."

She did so, and the blazing eye fastened upon his face. "You see?" he said. "It's no stranger. No wolf in the bushes. Just that well-known crook and murderer, Bill Kennedy. You've seen him around."

"But—but what can we do? What are your plans?"

"Just discuss mutual problems," he said smilingly. "Over a spot of tea. Just look facts in the face. Maybe we'll thumb our noses at 'em. Maybe we'll cry. But no hysterics, Ruth."

She kept the light on him for a long moment. Then, "Very well. Lead the way, please."

He went in and continued directly to the stove. He knew of no way to proceed other than to be entirely matter-of-fact. He slid the hearth back and opened the

door, so that the fire cast a glow on rafters and walls. "Better turn off the flashlight," he said over his shoulder. "We've got to make it last." She did so and stood by the bunk, watching him.

He took off his leather jacket and hung it on the wall. The room was pleasantly warm, the water boiling. He got down the battered saucepan, tin cups, and can of tea. "You'd better brew it," he said. "I'll get in more wood." He went outside at once, leaving her standing there.

He took his time with the first load of wood. When he brought it in, sparkling with frost, she had her coat off and the tea was steeping. He didn't look at her but knew her glance was following him. When he came with the fourth load and racked it on the growing tier against the wall, the tea was poured and four sandwiches were on the bunk, still wrapped in their waxed paper. There were also four chocolate bars.

He'd forgotten about the bars. They'd be worth more to her than sandwiches on the home stretch.

"The tea's ready," she said.

She was standing in the shadow back of the stove. Only the front half of the cabin was illumined. He handed her one of the steaming cups and took his own place in front of the hearth, in the light, with the stove between them.

"Do we eat our sandwiches now?"

"No, we'll save them. One tomorrow, one a day after that."

The tea was good. It was hot, heart-warming. They sipped slowly, looking at each other past the stovepipe, while the wind whispered across the roof and the heater grinned redly in the shadow.

Again he groped his way. One thing was certain: the facts had to be established.

"I had hopes for Rocky until I saw the mine," he said. "The whole picture's fairly clear now, I think. Whitey wanted to bring you up here alone and eliminate you. It was the simplest way. But Rocky persuaded him to bring me into it—somebody who'd play ball with them—and have you sign off legally. That scheme failed, so Rocky's washed his hands of it all. His conscience is clear." He imitated Rocky's shrug, waving his cup. "He tried, didn't he?"

She said nothing, waiting. He couldn't read her expression in the shadow, but from her pose she was rigidly on guard. It was like talking to a stranger.

"So we're marooned here. We're on our own. Let's start from there." He took up the kettle. "Another?"

She shook her head and put her empty cup down on the back of the stove. He started to refill his own cup, then set it down and placed the kettle on the hearth. *Don't kid yourself, Kennedy*, he thought. *You've had your tea.*

"Okay, Ruth," he said. "We'll start further back. It isn't what we've got to face but how we face it that counts. We're up against it here. The odds are we won't make it. That isn't what's bothering you, is it?"

She broke her silence. "No. It's your attitude toward all this. It's quite offensive."

"Sorry. In what way?"

"You took me down to the glacier just now," she said evenly. "It was quite impressive. You wanted to make sure that I understood very thoroughly that we were done for, that there was no way out of this ghastly place."

He shook his head. "I was looking at the *only* way out as a matter of fact. So we'd know where we stood."

"So we could make the best of it," she agreed. "You've a positive genius for that. But there are limits, you know." She gestured about the cabin. "No furnishings. No privacy. No food to speak of. The food won't matter for a day or two, of course. We had a marvelous breakfast at Prince Rupert, didn't we?"

"Ham and two eggs," he said, watching her. "Buttered toast. *And* marmalade."

"So we'll be quite comfortable for a day or two. If it storms, what of it? You've anticipated that. It's good wood, isn't it?"

"Excellent," he said. "Well seasoned."

"We may be snowed in for days and days." She indicated the bunk. "There's only one sleeping bag—a mere detail. It's undoubtedly big enough for two. When everything's so delightfully primitive like this, one musn't be squeamish, must one? As long as we can't help it, everything should be entirely chummy and cozy."

"It happens," he said, "that better men and women than you and I have slept under the same blankets in the North. When they had to."

"Unmarried persons?"

"Cold persons," he said with grim amusement. "If it's cold enough and there's one set of blankets, you crawl in or die."

"An example, I suppose, of the primitive urge to survive?"

"Among the more primitive types," he agreed, nodding. "Not *us*, of course. . . . Wait, Ruth," he said quietly. "I withdraw that. We've no time to quibble." He tilted his head, listening to the sweep of the wind across the roof. "I've done this backward. I should have told you in the beginning that you'll be holding down the fort here alone. You'll have all the privacy you wish. Even to sleeping alone."

"Thank you," she said. "You're extremely thoughtful. And just where will you be?"

"On the way to the east fork. I'm leaving in about ten minutes."

She smiled at him. He had never dreamed he would see the moment when her smile would hurt. "Really? I had the notion—you told me, in fact—that it was impossible afoot. One's stories change, don't they?"

"Our only chance now," he said, "is that it's possible. I'm taking the sleeping bag with me. I wouldn't live through the first storm without it. You'll have to get along on the bunk here, with your coat and the fire. It

won't be comfortable, but you'll survive—long enough. D'you mind?"

"Not at all. If it becomes tedious I'll have many pleasant memories to rely on. For example, Aunt Beth and Aunt Aggie—how much it *might* have meant to them if I just hadn't given you that letter to mail. Your letting me cry on your shoulder up there in the tunnel—a most gracious gesture. The charmingly hypocritical manner in which you let your eyes laugh when you said: 'Hi, Ruth!'"

"The referee must be blind," he said, between his teeth. "All those were below the belt."

"I beg your pardon?"

He shrugged. "If I make it I'll send someone after you. Don't give up hope until the end of the second week, at least. I'll try to make it in one rush, but I may get snowed in somewhere."

"A heroic picture," she said. "I'm impressed no end."

"I'll leave the food here, the flashlight, and the rock hammer," he said. "Use the rock hammer to keep the water hole open. Conserve your strength. Don't be frightened at night. Remember, there's nothing here to harm you. No prowling animals, no men." He turned away abruptly, tightening his belt. "Well, I'll get in the rest of the wood."

When he came back with the first load his anger and hurt had faded again. It was impossible to hold animosity toward her now. Life was too short—literally. . . . She was sitting on the edge of the bunk, staring

unseeingly at the fire. Her eyes were dark and luminous. He couldn't tell whether it was her inner speculations or the glow from the hearth that warmed her cheeks. Nor whether she seemed so poignantly beautiful because he was seeing her, in these minutes, for the last time.

He stacked the wood methodically and went out again. On his second trip she said: "You're a remarkable person, Mr. Kennedy. I should be quite carried away by all this, except that I've seen it before. You have a quaint expression for it—running a bluff, isn't it?"

"There's plenty of matches up on the shelf," he said. "I'd keep the fire going, though, if it turns real cold."

He brought in the last load and stacked it up with grim satisfaction. She would know hunger and loneliness, but the cold of the barrens would never touch her. "Use the big chunks at night," he said. "They'll hold the fire while you sleep."

He used the cutting edge of the rock hammer, awkward though it was, to split a considerable pile of kindling. When he was through he placed the hammer on the shelf and looked about him. The water bucket was half empty. He took it out, filled it, and brought it back.

That was all. The chores were done. She was on her own now.

"It's turning cold, all right," he said, warming his hands. "Any questions, Ruth? Any errors or omissions? If not, the record stands approved as read."

She had her legs crossed, one elbow resting on her knee, her chin resting in her cupped hands. It was a graceful, comfortable pose.

"You know," she said, "I'm intrigued by this bluffing business. Streak of the gambler in me, no doubt."

He nodded. "Flying up here proved that. The gamblers have a phrase for it—you shot the works."

"And lost?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Tell me something, then. Why have you acted like this? I mean from the beginning? Because you've hated me all these years?"

"Oh no," he said. "No. It was because I loved you."

She looked up at him quickly, her cheeks dimpling a little. "My word! You'll say I invited that, I suppose?"

"It's the first rule of gambling," he said, smiling down at her. "Never bluff unless you're ready for a call. . . . Anything else?"

"One question occurs to me. How would you have acted if you'd hated me? . . . Never mind." She lifted her shoulders and looked back at the fire. "The going seems a bit rough. Let's get on with it. Play it out, you know."

"Time's on the wing," he agreed.

He stood there a moment longer, his fingers outspread to the heat, then turned to the bunk and adjusted sleeping bag and tarp in the pack harness. He lashed it securely and hefted it. It made a light load.

He crossed to the wall, took down his leather jacket,

and put it on. He put on his helmet, wincing a little as he adjusted the chin strap. It irritated the bruise on his jaw. This reminded him of Red Schafer, of all the things, briefly glimpsed, that might have been except for that ruinous moment in the alley. Good lord, that was only eighteen hours ago!

He stood, gloves in hand, and gave the cabin a final survey. The flashlight was on the bunk beside her, the rock hammer on the shelf. The water bucket was full, the wood split. He took up the pack, thrust his arms through the shoulder straps, and shook himself, adjusting the load.

"Well, Ruth," he said, "this is it. I won't be seeing you again, whether I make it through or not. You understand that, and why."

"I should protest, no doubt." She looked up at him questioningly. "I should say that we've barely met and must you hurry off? Or what? Sorry if I seem to fumble my cue."

"I'll lead with my chin once more," he said, smiling down at her. "The pride of the Kennedys versus the pride of the MacRaes. We've had our tea. You'll recall, though, that there was no lemon. . . ."

"You're leading up to something," she accused. "I hear it stirring in the bushes."

"Right. D'you mind if I kiss you good-by? You'd rather not, perhaps?"

"I'd rather not. Sorry."

He inclined his head and drew on his gloves. "Okay.

. . . It's been a pleasure to see you again. I'd thought of you often since Shawnigan. Too bad things broke the way they did." He gestured about the cabin. "Take care of yourself. Don't be afraid. Keep the fire going. . . ." *Just keep talking, Kennedy*, he thought. *You're weakening fast.* "Well," he said, "good-by."

"Good-by."

He opened the door, backed out, nodded to her, and closed it behind him.

The swirling air smote him. It was bitterly cold. He plunged at once through the scrub timber, crunching through the frost crystals. A dozen paces away he halted, listening. He thought he had heard her calling his name.

But the cabin door remained closed, and no sound came from within its walls. Frozen branches creaked in the gloom about him. Far above, in the moonlit crags, the desolate orchestration of the wind howled on.

He climbed the moraine and halted at the crest, winded from the heavy going. From this point the lake seemed more desolate than ever: shadowed at the left, but the moonlight strengthening on the static ice and the lifeless western wall. He made out the cabin in the timber, the sparks whipping away from the chimney.

He watched those sparks for a long time. They came from the glowing fire, and she was watching that fire. He knew that that picture would remain with him always, sharply etched. *Well*, he thought, turning away, *good-by, Ruth.*

He mounted up, northwest, appraising the unfolding terrain. It became a vast snow field whose upper edge ended at the base of a lofty cliff and whose lower edge broke off into space. Far below—too far—was cloudlike timber. Far ahead a crenellated ridge was black against the stars.

He started in that direction—it was the only way—picking his way carefully over the crusted snow, blinking in a fog of ice particles that quartered by from the north, riding the booming wind.

CHAPTER XV

AFTER MIDNIGHT BY THE CLOCK, five hours and weary miles from Luna Lake, the storm and its attendant darkness made further progress impossible. The moon had been blotted out at the zenith long since, and the western stars had faded as under a lowering curtain. The cold had a sullen, deadly quality now. First flurries of snow belching down from the heights had merged into a steady blast that seemed to scour the very rock underfoot.

Bill broke into a shuffling dogtrot on the last stretch, sprinting for shelter. Dead ahead, though he could no longer see it, was the ridge at which he had aimed since quitting the lake. It had grown, hour by hour, into a barrier that entirely choked the narrowing snow field: a vast moraine caused by countless acres of rock that had crumbled and crashed from the sheer face of the mountain.

He made it to the shoulder-high fragments at its lower edge and laboriously mounted around and over

them, feeling his way. The force of the wind increased with each upward step; he could hear it screaming through hidden obstructions above. He had no notion of trying to cross the barrier tonight. Shelter was the thing. Somewhere above would be a cave or ledge, protected from wind and hurtling snow, where he could hole in until dawn.

He found it at the crest: a low niche roofed by arched debris, facing away from the wind. He knew it was the crest because the footing leveled off and began to fall away. Beyond and below was nothing but swirling blackness. Yet this exposed position had an advantage: if the storm held up, the scouring wind would permit no choking drifts here.

He backed into his cave like a badger, spread the tarp with stiffening fingers, and unrolled the sleeping bag upon it. Turning half of the tarp back over the bag gave added protection. It was the most primitive of shelters, but by contrast to the forces rolling by in the blackness outside, it was a castle, no less. Hurriedly he took off his shoes and outer clothing, shook loose snow from them, and stacked them about and over the foot of the bag. He was careful not to drag the slightest snow particle with him when he crawled in, mindful of the oldest rule of the winter barrens: "Above all, keep your blankets dry."

It was a roomy bag, with double thicknesses of eider down and a heavy waterproof envelope. Rocky had bought the best. It smelled new and clean and was

vastly comfortable. As he snuggled down and the chill began to thaw slowly from his congealed face and aching muscles, Bill knew that he was safe for tonight, at least. Tomorrow might be a different story, but thus far he led in the race.

He cast up the balance, like a miser counting his gold. He was hungry, but though he had eaten only one meal that day—breakfast at Prince Rupert, more than twelve hours before—he was not too hungry to sleep. Part of his present wolfish craving was synthetic, rooted in the knowledge that there was no food. The real belt tightening would begin tomorrow.

He was thirsty, but not uncomfortably so. Twice during that seemingly interminable haul along the snow field he had paused at shallow grooves and hacked down through the ice with his pocket knife and so found summer seepages still trickling sluggishly there. Short days hence not a drop of water would be stirring along these frozen slopes.

But he would have to get down to the protection of the timber tomorrow—the next day at the latest—or the race would be lost. There was no use blinding himself to one grim fact: the iron grip of winter was closing on the Rockies. The present blast might be a mere advance guard of the forces slumbering in the peaks. It might blow over before morning. But from this time on nothing that moved or breathed could hope to live long or travel far in these bitter, wind-scoured heights.

As he pulled the flap of the bag down more snugly

about his head some loose objects slithered about his shoulders. He felt for them in the darkness, found them, and identified them at once by their contour and the texture that covered them: four chocolate bars.

He lay for a moment, warm and still, deaf to the roar of the wind and the tiny pattering of ice particles settling in the cave. That Ruth had surreptitiously thrust these bars into the rolled sleeping bag was touching enough. In calories, energy food, she had given him more than half her meager store—close to the ultimate in unselfish gestures.

But it went farther than that. As he thought back over that last time sequence in the cabin—he had already lived them a score of times in memory—it became plain that she could only have done it while he was getting in the last of the wood. After they'd had their tea. *Before* she had said: "You have a quaint phrase for all this—running a bluff, isn't it?" Therefore, she had known in her heart that it was no bluff.

How much more, the acceptance of what other truths, had been hidden under her smiling poise?

He would never know, and it was useless, dangerous, even to speculate on it now. That she had projected her personality across the long miles from Luna Lake—warmly, vividly—merely reaffirmed that that phase of life had been closed. She and those moments were gone. The snow field could not again be crossed.

He decided to eat two of the bars now, two tomorrow night. The first sustained, stamina-devouring haul

was what counted in this marathon. The moment his resistance dwindled he was defenseless against the cold. Bodily heat, the mere ability to keep warm, was the essential factor until he reached the timber.

He ate two bars, making each morsel last, knowing he would never again taste food so sweet and entirely good.

He awoke to a clear, brilliant dawn. When he first peered out and saw the cloudless sky a surge of hope dulled the mounting ache of his hunger. The wind still howled on a sustained, desolate note, but the storm had temporarily blown over. No great snowfall had come in the night, from the look of the drifts lodged among the rocks.

He crawled out and dressed quickly in the numbing cold. Frost from his breath was thick on the flap of his sleeping bag. His shoes were like concrete, his leather jacket white and crackling. Fast as he moved, he was thoroughly chilled by the time he got his equipment rolled.

Out in the open, in the full force of the wind that swept the crest, the cold was compounded and deadly. His durable clothing seemed to thin moment by moment. As he took in the overpowering vista northward, where peaks loomed beyond massive peaks as far as the eye could see, his synthetic hope faded. He had probably come twelve miles the night before—slipping, balancing, wasting precious stamina detouring around

obstructions that could easily have been avoided by day. What was that meager gain compared with the vast distances ahead?

In the immediate foreground was rougher going. The snow field, only temporarily blocked by this bristling drift, narrowed swiftly under the cliff. It became a sloping shelf and finally, as the lower and upper precipices merged, a mere whitened ledge that seemed to peter out on the sheer face of the wall.

And yet as his eyes followed that thin line to the end he saw that the ledge didn't actually disappear but rounded the last, mighty corner and so out of sight. That point was three or four miles away, though it seemed much closer. Something of promise might be beyond. There *had* to be. Certainly he couldn't stand here speculating. If there was a way it could only lie ahead.

The last stretch along the ledge, two hours later, was bad. The ledge itself was broad enough and almost level, but the combination of icy footing and savage gusts of wind forced him to inch from handhold to handhold, his body pressed against the living rock. Those were nightmare moments. Beyond the edge—and a single misstep would send him hurtling over it—was nothing but space.

He made it to the corner and crept around it doggedly. The force of the wind eased a little as the wall veered farther and farther to the north. Otherwise he would have had to halt, because the ledge was crum-

bling. The final break was just ahead. He made it and came at once to comparative safety: a huge crevasse, but a fault, a cleavage across the rock strata. It pierced into the cliff to a depth of twelve feet or more, its interior choked with rubble and ice. At the point where he stood was a considerable cave, dry of floor and protected from the wind. The gash narrowed rapidly above, and its course downward was like a bristling, rough-hewn chimney.

He started down after a momentary breather. He didn't permit himself to hope, but there was a chance that this crack extended all the way down to the timber. At least it should reach to the first giant step. From there some other feasible route down was probable. In any event, why climb from this altitude to higher, bleaker barrens?

That decision forced a supreme test of his pet theory: a gambler must be prepared to lose. What he lost here were eleven stamina-devouring hours: four on the terrific descent, seven on the even more ghastly return haul. An approximate one fourth of what he figured to be his life expectancy in terms of starvation, exhaustion, and cold. The *second* one fourth.

The impact of it—the realization that he had guessed wrong—came at dusk, three thousand feet below. As he came to the end of the crevasse and braced himself there, knees weak and every muscle in his body trembling, his reason refused at first to accept a verdict

plain to the eye: having descended this far, at such cost, he had missed the timber by a scant hundred feet.

Yet there it was, and no frantic scanning of the bleached wall below could change it. The whole base of the cliff had crumbled away here, crevasse and all. Stunted spruce bristled from the lower edge of the debris—so close that he could see each snow-whitened twig in the fading light. Summer seepages rushing down this crevasse during the centuries had worn the face of that last drop clean, rounding and smoothing out all possible handholds. The space between him and the timber might as well be the gulf between stars.

He had to go back. He faced that conclusion after heartsick moments during which his courage was backed into its corner, groggy and punch-drunk, ready for the count. He often wondered afterward what he would have done at that point except for thoughts of Ruth. For himself it would have been easy enough. His hands were already numbing dangerously, his ankles paralyzing in their cramped position. Merely relax and let go. The hell with it. The mountain had him licked.

But in the end, having faced it and having thought of Ruth and the remaining outside, remotest chance, he started back.

Night overtook him within the hour, and because the moon was hidden by the bulk of the mountain, only the vaguest of reflected light shone in the crack. Through five hours of darkness, feeling for each handhold, he climbed and rested and inched stubbornly on,

like a mole burrowing toward light. At the end he was fighting for sufficient strength merely to lift his weight from one projection to the next. The last thirty feet, with the goal in sight, seemed just thirty feet too far.

He made it, got his elbows on the floor of the cave, rested there, then inched his body up. He turned over on his side and lay prone, utterly spent. It was near midnight. He was back where he had started from just after noon.

There was still a chore to be done: inch back into the cave, as far as possible from the swirling air currents, unroll and crawl in. He got out of his pack and came up on hands and knees and crawled back into the darkness, back against the living rock. He unrolled the bag, laid it out, got it ready. Then he crawled to his right, toward an ice formation he had seen at noon. It was a seepage that had created great icicles joining roof to floor. He struck a match to survey it, then got out his knife and hacked through the central column.

He opened up a thin, trickling vein, caught it in his cupped hands, and drank deeply. The trickle would be sealed again by morning. Ice seemed to congeal on his fingers, and he dried them clumsily on his handkerchief. He knew that he was at dangerously low ebb. Even his tremendous physical exertion hadn't entirely fought off the encroachment of the cold.

And yet, momentarily refreshed, and in the grip of a blind, futile rage at the calamity that had overhauled him, he squatted for a moment, looking up through

frost-rimmed eyes at the crevasse overhead. One look up there might tell tomorrow's story, the final story. If the crevasse was choked up above it could easily be that he could afford to sleep late in the morning. . . .

He crawled up, feeling lighter without the meager bulk of his pack, and found that the angle of the crevasse changed a little for the better. He could actually walk in a stooped position, hands on knees, and another dim corner loomed far ahead. He sham-bled toward it and after long moments came to it and peered upward.

He could only make out silhouettes in the darkness up there, but it didn't look bad. The crevasse seemed to be widening as it mounted. He tried to lash himself to the effort of making it to one more corner but just couldn't do it. He still had to make it back to the sleeping bag. . . . Better wait till morning. It was better to have hope to feed on, at that.

He went back more slowly, his knees buckling. His legs seemed to be made of rubber, and his arms were stiff. He rested often and had to pause for a long time before negotiating the last drop to the floor of the cave. He had to remember where each handhold was. He had to do everything in slow motion. Too bad to slip and fall here. . . .

He made it to the floor and fell there. He turned on his side, unbuttoned his jacket, and tried to unlace his boots. His fingers had no feeling in them, and he thrust his hands inside his jacket and inside his shirt, under his

clamped arms. As he lay there, eyes closed, he worked his chin out of the strap and got his helmet loose. The sleeping bag was less than six feet away in the darkness. The wind swirled in the cave, and the moan of it was a long fanfaronade in the crevasse above. *Hang on, Kennedy*, he thought, teeth clenched. *You'll make it yet.*

His fingers had a faint touch of life. He identified the proper thong in his bootlace and pulled the bowknot free. With his thumbs he loosened both laces and with patient effort got his belt unbuckled.

Then he crawled toward the bag and found its edge. He came up to his knees, got his jacket off, and spread it clumsily over the foot of the bag. It seemed bulkier than before, as though some other covering were outspread there. He felt of the bag, and it was bulging under his hand.

He got out a match but couldn't hold it at first. Then he clamped it between the first two fingers, between the knuckles, and struck it on the rock overhead. It flared momentarily, lighting up the cave. All registered upon him in a photographic impression.

A durable coat was outspread over the end of the bag, its skirts ragged and ice-incrusted. Other trail-worn objects were tucked in against the wall, and out in the clear stood a pair of high-laced shoes. They were sturdy shoes, scarred but durable still, much smaller than his own.

He clawed back the flap of the sleeping bag. Ruth

was lying there, facing toward him, her eyes closed and her head pillowed on her arm. Her hair lay in tousled, dark masses, pushed back from her forehead. She was breathing in a slow, shuddering way. Ice particles in her delicate eyebrows and long lashes were just melting. They were like tiny tears trickling down her cheeks.

Then the light went out and darkness swooped into the cave.

Suddenly he was afraid. She had come all the way from Luna Lake in one haul. She had crawled the last stretch. "Ruth!" He lowered to an elbow beside her. "Ruth!"

She was still conscious. She said haltingly, a statement of fact rather than a question: "It's you, isn't it—Bill. . . . Sorry to move in—like this." Each breath was inhaled with a shuddering sigh. "Get in quickly—please. I'm sure you're—quite frozen."

He was, and it was with wooden, clumsy movements that he presently inched in beside her. She held the covers away, making room. He kept his back to her, trying not to press against her, fearful even in his own complete exhaustion of hurting or frightening her.

But she drew him close to her, feebly helped him tuck the covers in, helped him draw the flap down over their heads.

"There," she said. "There. . . ." Her arm crept about him and held him close. She was like a child lately lost in the black forest but come at last to sanctuary. Her face was pressed against his back, and all her chilled

body was huddled against him. "Now—the mountain's behind me. You're—between me and the edge. Don't let me—fall off, Bill."

"Easy," he soothed. "You're perfectly safe now. . . . Just relax. Quiet."

"But I've got to tell you—why I came. You m-mustn't scold me."

"I won't. You're here. Does it matter why? It's all right, Ruth."

She clung to him, and he knew she was crying; that she had until now, all the long way, held back her tears. "I gave up hope—hours and hours ago. My only chance was that you'd go d-down the fault and I might catch you here. I *had* to. Then I found the bag here and I thought—I was afraid—that you'd g-given up." Her arm tightened about him; she was sobbing outright. "Bill—I'm glad you're safe. Sorry I'm—such a baby."

There's two of us, he thought. Ice—or something—was melting in his own tightly closed eyes. "Rest now. No more talk."

As warmth crept slowly, grudgingly, into their chill cocoon she was seized by a violent trembling. The force of it terrified her. He said: "It's all right. You're just thawing out. Wait till I start shaking."

She was relaxed when his shuddering began. When it passed she still lay inert, breathing regularly. Though she twitched at intervals, cried out, reliving in dreams certain nameless moments at the lake, on the snow fields and the screaming ledge, she was sound asleep.

He, too, yielded quickly to complete exhaustion. It blotted out hunger, worry, even the capacity for logical thought. He carried with him into a dreamless coma the sound of the wind sweeping across the crevasse. Death was strumming a lonely harp in the night. Its message was remote. All remaining values of life, all that was true and treasured were safe and close.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STORM strengthened before dawn, buffeting across the face of the mountain and roaring like surf in the heights. When Bill looked out in the gray twilight and saw the snow swirling through the outer portion of the cave his first thought was of the upper crevasse, their sole means of escape. If it was choked with snow they were done for.

He got up at once, moving softly so as not to disturb Ruth, and laboriously climbed the chimney. The way was clear along the first stretch, though minor drifts and a driving fog of ice particles made the going difficult. He looked up past the elbow. As far as he could see, which wasn't far, the crevasse was scoured clean. Swirling air currents produced a vortex that allowed no large masses of snow to come to rest. It would just be a long, torturing climb—to whatever awaited up there.

He returned slowly, his every joint aching with fatigue. Yesterday's terrific haul had left its mark.

Ruth's stamina must have been impaired even more by her battle across the snow fields. Yet they must get under way, and quickly. Bodily exhaustion, at this stage, was less menacing than the lowered vitality caused by starvation and cold.

When he descended to the cave he found her up and battling with her frost-stiffened boots. She had one on and was tugging at the other. She peered at him through her tousled hair. "Darn! They're like iron."

"So were mine," he said. He shook off the loose snow and seated himself beside her. "I'll give you a hand. Brace yourself now." He pulled it on and laced both boots for her, his fingers fumbling and stiff.

Then he placed her coat over her knees, and they sat and looked at each other in the chill twilight. Both were haggard and trail-worn. She tried to push back her hair into some sort of neatness, but the cold was biting into her unprotected hands, and she gave it up with a mute, singularly pathetic glance.

"Never mind," he said, his seared lips softening. "You'll do. . . . How are you, Ruth?"

"Bill," she said, "I may have told you last night. I don't remember. But I'm glad to see you."

It was as though a ray of sunlight had touched the gloomy cavern. They smiled at each other, shivering.

"I've got a hundred questions to ask you," he said, "but we'd better get started. There's two chocolate bars left. Let's eat them first."

"I've done better than that," she said. "I brought two cans of beans."

He thought she was joking. "Beans?"

"And the rest of the tea. And two tin cups. You know, in that empty knapsack you left behind. There it is, against the wall. I even brought some kindling. Wasn't that silly, carrying fuel all that distance?"

"Listen," he said. "Where did you get two cans of beans?"

"On a rock up above the glacier. I found them there—after they were gone."

"Who?"

"Whitey and Rocky. They flew back to the lake this morning, you know. No—it's yesterday morning now. . . . This is such a strenuous life. One loses track of the days, doesn't one?"

"Miss MacRae," Bill said in measured tones. "There's somebody a touch balmy in this household. Maybe it's Bill Kennedy. . . . Whitey and Rocky flew back to the lake?"

She blinked at him. "Yes."

"You talked to them?"

"Oh no. They thought I'd gone with you. But I was hiding in the rocks up by the glacier. They'd burned the cabin down, and I was sure their intentions toward me weren't kindly. . . . My word, Mr. Kennedy—d'you mean to say you found me here in the bag last night and didn't even ask why I'd come, or anything?"

She giggled. "I know—you didn't care. You were just making the best of it. Your back was cold."

"Listen," he began grimly, then halted. It could wait. Food—hot food—came first. "Sit there, my buxom lass," he told her. "I'm going to put up a windbreak and build a fire."

He had the tarp up quickly, anchoring its lower edge with rock, wedging its upper edge into small crevasses in the ceiling against the swirling snow. He built the fire in this sheltered nook, hacked into the ice-incrusted seepage, filled the tin cups, and nestled them in the flames. He opened the cans of beans, placed them on the coals, and licked off the blade of his knife.

She watched him smilingly. "Appearances are deceiving, Mr. Kennedy. I'd think you were a savage if I didn't know you are a gentleman."

He bowed. "Thank you so much. Will you take charge of the tea, please?"

They dined like kings. There were no spoons for the beans, so he whittled out a brace of paddles, and they scraped the cans clean. The tea was good. They ate the two chocolate bars for dessert. It wasn't enough—little more, in fact, than a snack to their wolfish hunger.

Yet it comprised, literally, a new hold on life.

He had four cigarettes left in the pack. He got out two and they lighted up. He was on an elbow beside her, facing the fire, and she drew him closer, so that his head rested on her lap. She spread her coat over him

and tucked it in. Then she leaned over him, an arm across his shoulders, looking down at the glowing coals.

The last of the wood was there. Only coals were left. Comfortable as it was—and even the roar of the wind enhanced the sense of security here—it was only temporary. Time, as always, was on the wing.

"Okay," Bill said. "Whitey and Rocky flew back yesterday morning. You were up in the rocks by the glacier. What were you doing up there?"

"I'd gone up to look at the snow field," she said. "I had the knapsack with me, and the kindling and stuff. But I knew I wasn't actually going to start out across the snow field. There was just a chance that you might be coming back. It was frightfully clear. I could see miles. But you weren't coming back. So I'd decided to find a nice crevasse in the glacier—a sort of niche where I could sit like a simple-minded little Buddha, with my hands folded. And freeze. It seemed like a nice, genteel way to die. The lake was quite beautiful, with the sunlight in the mist over there at the falls."

"But why? Why give up so quickly?"

"Because of a detail you overlooked, Mr. Kennedy." She brought up her hand until it rested on his head. She smoothed back his hair, ran her fingers through it, and smoothed it again.

"There are men like you, you know. And there are men like Whitey Bodine. Whitey had already committed two murders—he thought. Suppose he decided to polish off Rocky and come back alone?"

"Oh no," Bill said. "Good men have tried that on old Rocky. He doesn't polish off easy."

"Not as long as he can talk himself out of it," she agreed. "And that's exactly what happened. But let me tell it just as it happened."

She'd heard the plane coming, then seen it flashing in the sunlight over the gap and had wedged herself into the rocks. Whitey had set the ship down on the ice just below the glacier, almost directly below where she was hiding. Whitey got out alone and went directly to the cabin. At that time, though she hadn't known it, Rocky was still in the ship.

Whitey had come up to the cabin stealthily. He'd gone in. Fortunately she'd let the fire go out hours before, trying to make up her mind what to do. Meantime shedding a few tears, as usual. Thinking about Aunt Aggie and Aunt Beth. And Bill. And Bill. And that selfish, simple-minded wench, Ruth MacRae, who hadn't even let Bill kiss her good-by. . . . Anyway, the stove was cold. So Whitey hadn't known she'd been gone from the cabin only a matter of minutes.

He'd come to the door and shouted to Rocky: "They've both pulled out. Come on—let's wipe the slate clean. Bring that red can with you."

So Rocky had climbed down from the ship and gone over to the cabin, carrying the red can. It must have held gasoline, because when they ran out of the cabin presently, the cabin burned like a torch, a frightful blaze. They watched it until it began to die down—

only the chimney was standing; the rest was coals—then they came over and climbed up on the ridge and looked out over the snow field.

They were not very far from where she was, and she could hear them talking. Both agreed, looking at the snow field, that they—she and Bill—could never make it through. Whitey had been cheerful about it. He and Rocky were in the clear now. They owned the mine. They'd already made up their story about what had happened to Ruth. She had insisted on staying here with Bill to make a complete inspection of the mine. They—Whitey and Rocky—hadn't dreamed that Bill was an utter renegade, otherwise they wouldn't have permitted her to stay here alone with him. They had found it out at Prince Rupert and hurried back—too late. Murder and suicide.

"Hm-m," Bill said. "Nice guy, Whitey. . . . How did Rocky act?"

Rocky had been sort of gloomy. He was sorry for Bill—sorry for both of the "young ones." He'd cursed Whitey, called him a variety of quite nasty names. Whitey had merely showed his teeth. The thing that griped him, Rocky had said, was that Bill *might* have made it through to the east fork, if he'd only known, when he came to "an ungodly big fault," that he should go up, not down. Once on top, the first canyon on the north led to the east fork. He could have made it to a trapper's cabin there. The trapper's name was Joe Campana, a friend of Rocky's. . . . But no; Bill would

waste a whole day going down the fault. He'd be all in, done for, by the time he got back to the ledge.

"That's what decided me—that wasted day. And those cans of beans. Rocky left them there behind a boulder. . . . I *might* catch you here. I owed it to you and Aunt Aggie and Beth—and dear, dumb little Ruth—to try to, at least. . . . What's the matter, Bill?" She leaned over to look into his face. "You jumped."

"Just an idea that hit me." He inhaled deeply on his cigarette. "Wait while I wrestle with it."

It was more than an idea; it was certainty. Rocky had *known* she was there, crouching among the rocks beside the glacier. The signs had escaped Whitey. Her tracks had been wind-blown. Whitey had been sure that she had quitted the lake hours before.

But you couldn't fool a wolf like Rocky. He'd seen her there. He'd talked to her, warned her, encouraged her, in the guise of upbraiding Whitey. He had set out two cans of beans. In effect, he had pointed across the snow field. "Run him down. You can do it, gal. You'll catch him at the fault."

Why? Why had Rocky engineered them into a trap that could have been fatal to both—and *then* risked all his winnings by pointing the way out?

"Go on," Bill said. "Rocky left the beans right there, eh? Whitey didn't see it?"

"No. Whitey had started down. Rocky took the cans out of his Mackinaw—he had one in each pocket—and set them down carefully. I think he had some notion

we'd find them if we came crawling back. He stood looking over the snow field for a minute, scratching his head. Then he shrugged and followed Whitey down the bank."

"And then?"

"They went over to the mine for a while. They came back and stood by the ship, arguing. Whitey was all aroused again when he found we'd broken into the mine. But Rocky soothed him. His general argument was, what difference did it make? So they finally got in and left. And as soon as they were gone—so did I."

"Across the windiest, dreariest snow field in the Rockies," Bill said. "On the home stretch you crawled. . . . Thank God for these healthy, husky gals."

She laughed, bending over him. "The primitive types. . . . Now, what was that idea that positively staggered you?"

He debated telling her and decided against it. It had no bearing on what immediately lay ahead. It might have, later. But they were a long way yet from Joe Campana's cabin.

"It's this," he said. "We do have a chance. If we start right now."

"Must we?" She sighed. "I suppose we should."

He came up on an elbow, but her arm held him, his cheek pressed gently against her breast. He could feel her heart beating steady and strong. He made no move, knowing that she was waiting, that her lips were ready, if he but turned to her. *Sweat blood, Kennedy*, he

thought, fighting an agony of longing. *There's hope—but not for you.*

"You're impossible, Bill," she whispered. "You haven't put your arm around me once. You haven't kissed me. How much crow do I have to eat?"

"We're still on the trail," he said, almost brusquely, pushing away. "We'll discuss that down at Campana's. Meanwhile, let's roll up and roll out, eh wot?"

She released him but did not immediately get up. She sat mutely, her chin cupped in her hands, looking down at the dying fire. She nodded. "Right—as usual."

She started to get up, winced, and sat down again. She extended her legs and rolled down her heavy ragged stockings. Her knees were bruised and darkly lacerated. She touched them gently, head bent, and he saw her lips quivering.

"Good lord!" He knelt beside her and got a folded handkerchief out of his hip pocket. He tore it in half and into quarters. Gently he taped up the bruises, knotted the frail bandages firmly, and drew back the stockings over them. "There—that'll protect them from the wind, at least."

"It shows I'm not used to crawling," she said as he helped her up. "Maybe I won't—any more."

"You won't have to," he said cheerfully. "Once we're on top it ought to be easier going."

CHAPTER XVII

IN SPITE OF ITS RAGGED EDGES, Ruth's heavily lined coat was both a windbreak and warmth. High-laced boots and heavy gloves completed her armor. With her turban pulled down over her ears and her collar turned up, little more than her eyes was exposed to the driving snow.

Bill carried their meager outfit strapped close to him. A lot of climbing ahead. "You lead off," he told her. "Take it easy and be sure of your footing and each handhold. The minute you're tired, stop and we'll take a breather. Ready?"

Both looked about the gloomy cavern. The wind swirled through it, and fine snow was already powdering the stretch of rock where their sleeping bag had been spread. The smoke-blackened rocks of their campfire still held grudging heat. They glistened with melted snow, and the last of the embers between them popped with tiny explosions. Two empty cans stood there, side by side.

Bill gestured toward the chimney. "‘Excelsior!’—and all that."

"And all that," she agreed, leading off.

They climbed slowly up the chimney, then moved in crouched position along the steep but relatively easy section that led to the first upward bend. It was not easy for Ruth. Though she made no complaint, he could tell from her labored steps that each movement was torture.

They passed the elbow, and an almost sheer stretch began. Her clothes were an encumbrance here; the skirts of both coat and suit got in her way. "Dresses weren't made for this, Mr. Kennedy. And I'm afraid you're seeing more legs than you should."

"They're good British legs," he told her. "Keep 'em climbing."

The wind was stronger, coming in savage gusts. Fine snow stung their faces, fogged the crevasse above and below, and always the cold pressed in, exploring with icy fingers for joints in their armor. Except for the trail data Ruth had overheard, Bill would have looked upon this as an entirely hopeless effort. The fault might extend to the crest, but what then? Now the terrain was mapped ahead. Rocky's directions had been explicit.

That had been the most puzzling of Rocky's many puzzling gestures. Why he had done it was an enigma that seemed to have no answer. His purpose, whatever it was, might have weakened when he actually saw her

there in the rocks, huddled and terror-stricken. Some larger design might be back of it.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now except to make it to the top, then to the timber, then—if possible—to Joe Campana's cabin. If the storm and the mountains permitted.

Ruth had crowded herself too far. On an immense area of good footing—almost as large as the seat of a chair—she reeled in toward the wall and would have fallen except that he clutched her quickly. They leaned back against the rock. She was so winded that each bursting breath had a moan in it.

"You've got to take it easier," he gasped. His own knees were weak and trembling. "The air's thin."

Few points on the continent were more desolate than this howling crevasse. Nor, in such slippery footing, more dangerous. She turned her face from the depths and clung to him. "Bill—I'm afraid."

"'S all right, Ruth. Easy. Just look up to the sky."

Her panic passed, but she still clung to him, her face upturned. The sky was thinning overhead, growing brighter. They were near the ceiling of the world.

"Bill—are we above the storm?"

"We soon will be—maybe."

She was soon breathing regularly and pushed away from him. "You'll think I'm a frightful baby. Really, I'm not."

"I know you're not, my dear."

"In fact, I've a feeling we're going to make it through."

"Keep your fingers crossed," he warned.

"If so," she said, "we're getting closer to something worse than this. I'm going to fight to make you see things my way, Bill. I'm sharpening my ax."

"We won't come to that," he said, "unless we make it to Campana's. Let's go."

Hours later, so it seemed, the broad forehead of the cliff began to retreat. The going was easier with respect to the upward climb; it was heartbreaking travel because the gradually widening crevasse was choked with debris. The snow had ceased long since. Only chill fragments of mist poured by. They saw the sun once; it peered down at them with blinding radiance, then was blotted out again.

The crevasse finally petered out. They were on a rounded dome of rock, weathered and bare. As they mounted across it, leaning into wind that seemed to blow in direct from interstellar space, Bill knew that their margin was thin. They couldn't rest long in these scoured heights. Without shelter they were done for. Only movement kept bodily temperatures up in this pitiless wind. Yet Ruth was failing fast, and her waning strength was the yardstick of their survival.

They were in blinding sunlight now, and he made her stop while they put on their goggles, their backs to the wind. Then he motioned toward the sky. The crest was in view there.

They made it, and he saw at once, orienting himself by the sun, the way they must go toward the east fork. They were on the highest point of a great promontory that thrust westward through the mist. Falling away on the north side, northwest, was a great glacial groove. Its bottom was choked with snow, but the living rock was exposed at the left, blown clean.

"There it is," he told her huskily.

But she held back, head and shoulders bowed, and when he tried to urge her on she resisted him feebly. "Let me rest—a little. Please."

"Let's make it to the timber," he urged. "There's no wind there."

She was slumping down. "Sorry."

He held her up, and in his own exhausted condition her weight seemed enormous. "Wait. Wait till I get the pack off. We'll sit on it—the tarp around us."

He wriggled out of his pack and got the folded tarp spread upon it. He lowered her there, sat clumsily beside her, and got the streaming and flapping tarp about them. It protected them from the teeth of the wind. But the cold was deadly. "Just for a minute," he warned. "This is bad."

They were marooned on an island above the clouds. It was an island among many and more towering islands: great peaks that sparkled and blazed against the sky as far as the eye could see. Not gray but dazzlingly white were the oceans of mist that poured majestically between.

They peered out through their flapping hood at that cold, terrible beauty. Her back was to him, so that his body was a further protection against the booming wind. She was encircled in his arms, sheltered, but he could feel his own back congealing.

She said: "We struggle on—but why? It'll be gloomy down there. Deep snow and all that."

"Hunger and cold," he agreed. "It may be lonely, even." He held her close, his arms across her breast, and she held his chilled hands tightly pressed to her. "So what, Ruth?"

"We're not primitive types," she said. "It isn't just the urge to survive. I can prove it."

"Prove it fast, then."

"I didn't bring those beans and that kindling across the snow fields for Ruth MacRae. No, nor for Aunt Aggie and Beth. Why, do you suppose?"

"Because you're a brave woman."

"It was because I was afraid I'd lost you. And you wouldn't be here, except for me." She leaned her head back, so that her turban pressed against his helmet strap, and their cheeks touched. "I'm going to use the ax now. D'you mind?"

"Hew to the line," he said. "But fast."

"It's a little late to inquire about this detail. There's no other woman?"

"No," he said. "There never was. None but you, my dear."

"Did you mean it back there at the lake when you said: 'It was because I loved you'?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," she said. "You're a fighter. You have courage. I have, too, haven't I?"

"You're also a gambler," he said. "Each minute we sit here means an hour less at the end."

"I'll hurry, then. . . . Why not go back to Seattle and face your difficulties there? Under the circumstances, isn't there a chance that the jury would be lenient? Isn't *any* chance worth while? You know where I'll be, of course. Jogging along—as usual. I'll have the means to see it through. I'm using that ax, Bill. With all my strength and all my heart. . . . Well?"

He said nothing for a moment. They swayed as one, splitting the wind like a rock in a current.

Then he said: "You've whittled me down, my dear. At least we'll discuss it." It came hard. He had never lied to her before. "After we're well fed and warm."

"Can't you say it now?"

"It'll jinx us. We're not in the clear yet. There's a better place than this—if we make it."

"I know," she said, beginning to shiver. "C-Campana's. Darn that man! Why didn't he build his cabin closer?"

At first their embattled descent was easier than their struggle toward the crest. Then the groove deepened and narrowed into a turbulent canyon down which the wind roared like a tide. The terrain grew rougher

underfoot. At dusk, when they came to timber line, four thousand feet lower and many miles westward, the grim part of it began.

The stunted spruce broke the force of the wind, as Bill had hoped, but drifts trailing the dwarfed trees were heartbreaking barriers. Deep snow must be avoided at all costs. Ruth's fading stamina could not have withstood two hundred yards of it. Exposed ledges and scoured ridges had to be followed, involving long detours. Boulders in the creek bed were ice-incrusted and bruising.

The creek itself had begun as a mere trickle, muttering under drifts and ice. It was now a robust stream that burst into the open now and then, roared over a jump-off, then slid again under a drifted sheath. It, too, was an increasing hazard. Again and again an abrupt cliff forced them to cross to the opposite bank—always in the deepening rapids, in open water. Some of the ice was mush; all of it was dangerous. Clear ice meant depth below. Bill cut a spruce limb for Ruth, and she leaned heavily upon it. He was himself weak-kneed and stumbling. Both were snow-whitened to the hips, their boots incrusted with frozen spray. The clouds seemed to be thinning overhead, so that near-by objects were visible in the darkening gorge. Bill searched the bank for some marker that would indicate the upper end of Campana's trap line.

They came to a narrow flat that was only a vague, white strip in the gloom. No willows grew on it; sum-

mer floods kept it scoured clean. A lone spruce was rooted in the bank at the left, and Bill detoured by it, with Ruth plodding blindly at his heels. The tree bore two blazes: one waist-high, the other some six feet higher, above snow level.

He leaned against the tree, too spent to feel other than an inner turmoil of dim, conflicting emotion. This must be Campana's trail. If so, it was the edge of life. The bitter mountains were behind them now. He explained the significance of the markers to Ruth. She was leaning against him, gripping her stick, her head bowed on her arms.

She said, with weary apathy: "I hope the cabin's warm. How do we know we'll be welcome?"

"You don't know old-timers like Campana," he told her. "He'd shoot us if we tried to get by."

He didn't tell her that it might still be miles away.

He almost carried her on the last stretch. The cabin was up on a bench, looking out through the timber, and courage alone couldn't take her up the short slope from the creek. He brought her left arm across his shoulders, grasped her sagging body in the crook of his right arm, and mounted step by laborious step to the threshold. Lights twinkled through the trees far below, and pale stars twinkled in the west, along the edge of the thinning storm clouds, but she didn't see them.

There was a note nailed to the door. By turning it

toward the west and bringing his eyes close, he could make it out.

HENRY:

Ime over to kettlemans on wolf creek. Be back friday. Move in ore come over to kettlemans and help us kill 3 gallons squareface.

CAMPANA

Beneath was a different scrawl. It said succinctly:

Hot dog!

HENRY

Bill grinned, in spite of his exhaustion, and pushed on in. Campana was gone. "Henry" had come and gone. Friday was four days away. This meant that nobody would pass this way, and Ruth could sleep forty-eight hours, if need be, undisturbed. And the lights of the tiny settlement seemed to be less than two miles away, across the meadows.

He lowered Ruth to a vague, bulky chair, found a bracket lamp on the wall, and lighted it. He got his pack off, staggering drunkenly, and looked about the big but snug room.

It was an old-timer's dream. Many trappers lived in squalor, malodorous and prideless. Not Joe Campana. Though much equipment hung on the west wall in orderly confusion—skis, snowshoes, parkas, scores of traps—the place was clean throughout. Bearskin rugs

were on the floor, and the chair where Ruth sat slumped, head back and snow-whitened boots extended, was given softness by the pelt of a half-grown cub. Bunks were built into twin alcoves flanking the huge fireplace. Earthenware pots and pans gleamed at the kitchen end.

Bill got wood from the kitchen bin and built a roaring fire in the fireplace. There was food direct from dreams on the wall shelves: quantities of canned goods, bacon, staples in square containers. He eyed the array wolfishly, but Ruth needed attention first.

She was almost out, unable to stand alone. He helped her out of her chill armor: her coat and the jacket of her suit. Her heavy sweater was also impregnated with snow, and the ragged hem of her skirt was incrustated with ice. "I'll manage now," she said weakly. "Just let me sit for a minute. You might get my boots off, please."

He knelt at her feet and got them unlaced, his aching hands warming slowly to life. He unrolled her ragged woolen stockings carefully over her bruised knees. Her feet were white and lifeless. "Keep them away from the fire," he warned. "They're not frozen, but they're liable to hurt plenty. . . . Wait, better put on those moccasins."

They were native moccasins, lined with the exquisitely soft fur of the snowshoe rabbit. He slipped them on and patted her feet. "Thank God for the Campanas. They're the backbone of the North. . . . Now, I'll put

up a screen and get some blankets warm. As soon as you're able to, crawl into bed."

He found Campana's extra winter blankets stacked on a high shelf, each carefully wrapped against dust and moths. He shook out a gorgeous pair of Hudson Bay's—white, four points—and a heavy army gray. The bunk on the right of the fireplace was neatly made up. The other, covered with a tarp, served as a stand for a leather suitcase, a folded duffel bag, and a large dry-cell radio.

Using two skis as supports—one wedged upright through the back of a chair, the other extending across to the mantel—he walled off the kitchen side from the fireplace and bunk, using the gray blanket as a screen. He hung the four points to absorb the heat and dragged Ruth's chair closer into the niche.

"There you are. Don't sit too long. Get your clothes off and hang them up on the screen to dry. Then crawl in, as is." He stood looking down at her, smoothing back her hair. "My compliments, Miss MacRae. You jogged along."

Her eyes were closed, but her flushed cheeks dimpled a little. "Thank you, sir. . . . When do—we eat? And what?"

"In about sixteen minutes. Mulligan. Flapjacks. Bacon. Coffee."

"Don't. I should be doing all this. And I should be telling you—things."

"In the morning," he said. "We eat first, then sleep

the clock around. This is where we were heading for, my dear. There's lots of time now."

He took off his leather jacket but not his boots. Let them thaw as they were; they'd soon be hitting drifts again. He built a fire in the kitchen stove, put on the kettle, dragged the mulligan pot forward, sliced bacon, and tossed it into a skillet. He mixed up flapjacks, a big batch, and opened canned corn and peaches. *I owe you five million, Campana, he thought. I'll leave five bucks.*

While waiting for the skillet he stood at the window, looking out toward the lights of the Meadows. They twinkled frostily. The vast expanse of the mountain meadow between was like a white, frozen lake. He could make it in a half-hour if the drifts weren't too deep on the flats. They probably weren't. The snowfall here was lighter than up in the higher country.

As soon as she's asleep, Kennedy, he thought. No debate. No good-bys. Just close the door gently behind you.

CHAPTER XVIII

HE DRAGGED UP A BOX beside her bunk and spread their banquet upon it. She was almost asleep, swathed like a cocoon, but the aroma of the food awakened her. She came up on an elbow, tossing back her tousled hair, and arranged the heavy blankets about her, so that little more than her face and one bare arm was visible.

"Blow out the lamp," she pleaded. "The light from the fireplace is enough. Something tells me the future Mrs. Kennedy isn't looking her best."

He blew out the lamp, came back, and seated himself gravely. She was in the shadow now, he in the flickering light. He poured her coffee. "I know you take your tea straight," he said. "How about coffee?"

She stifled a yawn. "One teaspoon, please. Just a touch of cream. . . . You didn't hear my last observation, I take it?"

"Sorry it's canned cream," he said, beaming at her. "Yes, I heard you. Flapjacks first? Or mulligan?"

"Mulligan, darn it," she said. "My word—look at

that bacon! Bill, d'you mind if I take it in my fingers and start snapping at it?"

When the meal was over, and it was a regal interval, she lay back, heavy-lidded, her head pillowed on her arm. "It's a foul plot," she asserted. "Now I'm stuffed and I can't possibly keep my eyes open. But I promise you, Mr. Kennedy——"

"Quiet," he said. "Wait till I clear the table."

Later she roused. "Don't touch the dishes. I'll do them in the morning."

"They're almost done," he said.

When he came back into the circle of firelight she was still fighting to keep awake. She turned her face toward him with a tremendous effort. Her lips scarcely moved. "Bill . . ."

"Wait till I get the other bunk cleared off," he said.

He moved the screen back a little and went through the motions of clearing the bunk. He left the radio there, and when he saw that she was asleep at last drew up a low stool and began manipulating the dials.

The type of radio was strange to him, but he soon had it turned on. He caught a station faintly, tuned in, and bowed his head on his arms, listening. It was a voice from the outside world, coming thinly but clearly through the void. There *was* an outside world. . . .

"Who's talking?" Ruth whispered.

"Hush," he said. "It's the radio. Some news com-

mentator down at Vancouver. He's describing the scene in London today. Chamberlain's back from Munich."

She was asleep—this time for good, he knew. He bowed his head again, listening, waiting for her to sink into such a complete coma that she could not be roused.

The news itself meant little. Just more world politics. Power politics half a world away. It would never touch this hemisphere. . . . The crowds at the station had been quite hysterical, the commentator related in his unemotional way. The police had held them back. Chamberlain had smiled at them, waving his umbrella. There had been cries of "Good old Chamberlain!" And the great man, who had forestalled the danger of war in Europe for generations to come, had said: "Hitler has no further territorial ambitions. We can rely upon his assurances. We have found peace in our time. . . ."

Bill thought: *She's asleep now.*

The murmur of the radio was soothing. He didn't know that he had fallen asleep, leaning there, until he was suddenly wide awake. It was as casual as though the flickering walls had spoken his name. And Ruth's. He listened, scarcely daring to breathe, wishing mightily that he could turn back the radio like a phonograph record and hear what had gone before.

But the clipped, unemotional voice went on:

"As a result of these admissions, both Flynn and Bodine are in custody at Prince Rupert, charged with fraud, abduction, and attempted murder. The Provincial Police flew up to Luna Lake today and found the

cabin burned, as Flynn had claimed, and no clue as to the whereabouts of the missing pair. It is reported at Prince Rupert that the police again took off by plane this evening, supposedly flying up to the east fork of the Finlay, where they will be in readiness to search the terrain to the north, the moment a mountain storm in the region permits.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, brings our information on the Luna Lake affair up to the present. Be sure to listen to our next news broadcast at ten-thirty tomorrow, when we should have additional reports. Also, Downing Street announces that Mr. Chamberlain will outline fully in Parliament tomorrow the essential details of the historic meeting at Munich, where Hitler's territorial ambitions were appeased and the disturbing threat of war entirely eliminated."

Bill turned it off and for a moment sat hunched and motionless. The news announcement had brought no major change to his own destiny. It had merely simplified the pattern a little, speeded up the loom. Only surprise in it was old Rocky Flynn. Why had Rocky turned on Whitey when big winnings were in their grasp, free and clear?

The winnings were the key to it, probably: on the way back from the lake had come some lurid showdown over a division of the loot. Perhaps the whole pot, and Rocky's scalp, had been at stake. Something had driven him to rush to the police for protection—a bitter pill for Rocky to swallow. Yet he'd be out of

character if he hadn't figured out some edge somewhere along the line, as usual, for Rocky Flynn.

It didn't matter. All that mattered now was that the Provincial Police had already left Prince Rupert by plane, heading for the east fork. They were in the air now. They'd probably show up here before midnight. Which meant that Bill Kennedy must lash his battered, bone-weary, apathetic body to a last effort. Get down to the settlement. Buy, borrow, or steal a dog team and equipment. Head north—well into the clear—before the ship set down.

And there was no use dallying here, basking in stolen warmth and comfort and synthetic hope, with a chore to be done.

He got up, moving woodenly, and got into his jacket and helmet. He stirred the pack with his toe and left it there. It was a long haul across the flat. If he could wangle a dog team he could manage a complete trail outfit as easily. He'd carried this load, any load, long enough.

He glanced about the cabin, drawing on his gloves. The log smoldered in the fireplace. There was no danger of flying sparks. Ruth was sound asleep. Win, lose, or draw, she was safe here, which was all that truly mattered. He could leave word at the settlement. They'd be over for her tomorrow.

Her face was to the wall. Only the top of her dark head was visible against the immaculate whiteness of the blankets that enfolded her. He didn't go near her

but crossed directly to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. He paused on the threshold while the cold bit into his face. It was easy enough to plan with iron purpose, to say in thought: "No argument, my dear. No debate. No good-by." To do it came hard. Something craven and weak-kneed and yearning held him chained for an instant, hoping she would waken and call to him.

She didn't waken or call, and he closed the door behind him as he had planned—gently.

There were drifts on the flat, and he stumbled through them, head lowered but eyes raised to the sky. The moonlit snow wavered before him, and the stars were both brilliant and blurred, as though he looked out through goggles splashed with rain. He had grown warm in the cabin, and the cold brought tears to his eyes. Beneath the snow was a crust of brittle marsh ice. As he clumped through it, the wind quartering at his back, the sound of his progress rolled and reverberated through the frosty night.

The settlement took form as a large building with flanking cabins, all fronting on the river. The east fork was a sizable river here at the Meadows. It had a bend at the left, and at this side of the bend an airplane stood on its skis like a big black mosquito. All the cabins strung out to the right were lighted.

Dogs were making a vast uproar as he circled the store. It came from the right, up the street between the buildings and the low docks. A dog team was harnessed

there. Helpers were hazing the strays back. Against a lighted doorway down the line a man was momentarily silhouetted, wriggling into his parka.

Four men were grouped about the big heater in the back of the store, all in silhouette against a bracket lamp on the farther wall. One was in uniform: a trooper in the winter pacs and service parka of the Provincial Police. None turned around as Bill came forward. The trooper made way for him as Bill moved into the circle beside him.

A lively debate was in progress. The trooper was doubtful about ground search being effective unless and until the plane spotted Kennedy and Miss MacRae. No search could be carried out until morning. The old-timers held that dog teams should be on the ground without delay. The storm was folding up. They should be at timber line by dawn. The plane could spot the young ones up on the snow fields, maybe, and then signal to the ground crew. Kennedy and the gal would have to be freighted out anyway, if they were still alive.

The speaker fell silent, looking hard at Bill. The trooper turned his head to look at him. A gaunt man at the right—the storekeeper, probably—stared at him under bushy brows.

Bill had taken his gloves off, spread his hands to the heat. He had made up his mind between the door and the stove. Ruth was in the clear now. He'd already traveled too fast, too far. He'd frozen enough, starved

enough, had his share of loneliness and futility. As far as any further chores on behalf of Bill Kennedy were concerned, the hell with it.

He said wearily, smiling a little: "No need for a search, boys. I'm Kennedy. Miss MacRae is safe at Campana's."

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOUR stared at him and each other. One of the old-timers across the stove from Bill was of the lean and withered type, his bald head projecting from his parka like a startled turtle. He seemed to grow in height. The whole room reeled.

When Bill opened his eyes after a moment of blackness he was seated with legs extended toward the stove. The storekeeper was bending over him, tin cup in hand. The two old-timers—one was a stocky man, heavy-jowled—were peering at him. "Can you swallow, lad-die? Take a sip, then."

Bill took a swallow, which burned and seared, and pushed the cup away. Long ago, in the Denby at Seattle, he'd tasted that stuff. It was associated with grief. "Thanks," he said. He was a little mortified. "I'm all right. My knees just folded up for a minute."

"Sure they did. Yeah. . . . So the gal's all right, hey? Not frostbit nor nothin'?"

"Just tired—all in." Bill looked about him. "Wasn't there a trooper here?"

"He'll be back in a moment," said the storekeeper. "He's gone after Sergeant Henshaw and Rocky Flynn. They'll be wanting to question you."

"Rocky's here?" Bill wasn't surprised, somehow.

"The police brought him along to assist in the search. He knows the country up there. . . . Wait, laddie. There's no time to be lost." The storekeeper was unhurried but wasted no words. "I'm McPherson. I knew your father. So did these two gentlemen. This one is Weatherby. This"—it was turtle-neck—"is Crim. . . . Very well, Crim."

"Look, Kennedy." Crim eyed Bill with reptilian intentness. "Rocky's been talking fast since he hit camp a while ago. While John Law wasn't listening. He's heading for the pen and knows it, but it *might* be pure quill. He claims he figured this Luna Lake deal from the first to do you a good turn. On account of Hod. He had to take long chances, with Whitey Bodine on his neck, but he gambled you and the gal would make it through. What's your theory?"

Bill grinned apathetically. "He did me a good turn?"

"You're here," Weatherby pointed out. "The gal's safe at Campana's."

"Look," Crim said. "His talk's bigger than that. He claimed that if you made it through, he's ready to carry the load. So you and the gal——"

"They're coming," McPherson cut in. A strengthen-

ing clamor was approaching outside. "Two questions should get to the heart of it, gentlemen. The killing and grub. Laddie, what about that killing in Seattle?"

"I did it," Bill said. "That's why I'm here."

McPherson nodded, with a guarded glance at the others.

"He claims he left some grub for you at the lake. How much, if any?"

"Two cans of beans," Bill said.

This seemed to brush aside all doubt. "That's enough for me, by the eternal!" Crim said. "This once, Rocky's on the level. Watch the fall of the cards, Weatherby. I'll get the dogs lined out."

He hurried away, pushing through the crowd thronging in at the door.

Bill got to his feet with an effort and leaned his back against the counter, facing the crowd. This was the public. This was society, to whom he owed his debt. Sergeant Henshaw, the law, was in the lead, with the trooper at his right. Bill remembered him—tall and severe—from the docks at Prince Rupert.

At the sergeant's left was Rocky Flynn.

Curiously, as the little man approached, his battered hat pushed back and his chest expanded confidently, Bill felt no animosity toward him. He was merely touched with a vague, bitter amusement in that any man living could run such a bluff in the face of the record. Every old-timer in the room knew who and what Rocky was. He was under arrest now, the bill col-

lector at his side, and all his black and seamy past strode with him as he advanced.

Yet his manner was that of one hero rushing to meet another while lesser men looked on, touched and understanding. He seized Bill's hand and beamed up at him, his ragged mustache quivering. As an act it was masterly. His pale blue eyes were actually misty under their shaggy brows.

"Doggone!" he breathed. "Doggone, boy—this here's an occasion! Shore you made it through! What did I tell you all? Some of you salty gents knew Hod Kennedy. Ain't he a block off the old chip?" He peered about him. "Where's ol' Samson Crim?"

"Putting his dogs away. He'll be along in a minute."

"Where's Weatherby?"

"Helping him."

"Okay, boys." Rocky had appointed himself master of ceremonies, his cheek bulging with an enormous chew. "Fire questions when ready. The boys want to know how you done it, Bill. Then you and I'll chin a little in private. After that the law takes over. Eh, Henshaw?"

"That's the understanding," the sergeant agreed coldly.

There was no question about the interest of the crowd. They had themselves threaded snow fields and bitter peaks. Yet Bill sensed mystery here. Poker players all, these old boys were awaiting the fall of the

nameless cards. He was sure of it when Weatherby entered the store and sidled unobtrusively into the group, his eyes fixed vacantly on Rocky. Everyone except the two officers seemed to recognize a cue.

"Okay, boys," Rocky said. "He's mine now. Official wheels have got to grind on. Come along, Bill."

Bill heaved away from the counter with an effort. The crowd made room.

The sergeant halted them. "One moment, please. It's not only fair but your legal right, Kennedy, that you understand your position. Flynn is under arrest for fraud, abduction, and attempted murder. His partner, Bodine, is under custody at Prince Rupert on the same charge. We also have advices from Seattle asking for your arrest and Flynn's, on a charge of murder. Flynn had admitted the local charges. He says he can produce a confession covering the Seattle affair. That's the purpose of his private talk with you. Is that understood?"

"Certainly——" Bill began. He had intended to say: "Certainly I'll confess. It's fact." But Rocky had his arm in affectionate grasp, and Rocky's fingers pressed warningly. "It's all right," Bill concluded.

"Very well, then. Fifteen minutes, Flynn."

Rocky beamed at the crowd. "No snooping around, you rats. Stay right here. Who's got the best cabin where we can set and rest our shoulder blades?"

"Mine," said Weatherby.

"Is the fire lit?" Rocky demanded. "How about foot

warmers? When we drink your hooch, have we got to use tin cups?"

"Get along," said Weatherby, grinning.

A fire was going in Weatherby's fireplace. Bill sat down at once, but Rocky went directly to the cupboard and came back with a bottle and two tin cups. Bill waved them away. "Not for me, old son. I drank with you once before."

"Shush," Rocky said, listening. "D'you suppose ol' Samson Crim has got his ear to the back door? Curious critter, that Crim."

He went to the back door, which opened upon a stoop ricked high with wood. He went out, closing the door behind him, and presently was back. "It's colder than blazes," he said.

He detoured by the wall and hung up his battered hat, first removing an ancient fishhook attached to the crown. There were several parkas hanging there, one of heavy winter fur. Rocky took off his Mackinaw, took a large envelope from the inner pocket, and put on the winter parka. He pulled the hood forward, attached the fishhook to its peak, just back of the bristling wolverine fur, then pushed the hood back.

"That there fishhook's for luck," he said, coming to the table. "I've carried it for seventeen years. Maybe it'll pay off."

He laid the envelope on the table and took up the bottle. Bill watched him, heavy-lidded. Rocky was

building up toward some dramatic moment. He'd have done it on the gallows.

"Three minutes gone," he said. "Four to go. I need eight minutes' edge." He poured the first drink. "I'm going to tell you something, Bill. Then we'll drink together."

"Not me," Bill said.

"We'll drink to Hod Kennedy," Rocky said. "Listen, first." He poured the second drink and took it with him to the fireplace. He leaned there, facing Bill. His forehead glistened a little.

"John Law's tough on this side of the line, Bill. Once I'm inside, looking out, I'm done for. Too old that-away. I could admit to a dozen killings, and it would be no skin off my nose a-tall. Because I'd never serve out my time and I'd never come to trial on any other count. You following me?"

Bill nodded. "What are you trying to sell me, Rocky?"

Rocky looked down at his cup, his mustache spreading. "What am I trying to sell him? he says. . . . Nothing but all you've dreamt about, son. For which you've frozen and starved. Them marble halls and all that. . . . Wait. Open up that there envelope. Read what's inside. But fast."

It was a single page, written in a cramped, illiterate, but entirely legible hand. It was Rocky's hand and was witnessed by Samson Crim and Joel Weatherby. In it Rocky had described clearly and positively how he had

killed a certain Red Schafer in an alley adjacent to De Silva's in Seattle. He had been in the act of rifling Schafer's pockets when his supposed victim had come suddenly to life and grappled with him. Whereupon he had struck down the said Schafer with a short length of pipe that happened to be lying near by. Unfortunately this had killed Schafer.

Bill read it through twice, puzzled, but beginning to get it. He recalled now what Samson Crim had said: "Rocky claims he's ready to carry the load."

He looked at Rocky and shook his head. He couldn't help softening a little. Grandstand or not, it was a heart-warming scheme.

"I can't stop to debate it, son," Rocky said. "You got all your life to figure it. Me, I got two minutes. I'm entitled to this much of a break."

"Break?" Bill repeated. "You want me to let you shoulder it all—and you call it a break?"

"And I'll tell you why," Rocky said. "There's two reasons. The first is Hod Kennedy. I said I'd pay off when we drank together. It was a promise. The second is, I want to pass out big. I don't hope to have folks remember me like they do Hod Kennedy. I ain't entitled to that. All I want 'em to say—like ol' Samson Crim and Joel Weatherby, for instance—is something like this: 'He was the crookedest snake that ever lived. He'd cheat you out of your eyeteeth. But on the last play he laid it on the line.' D'you get it now?"

Bill shook his head. In spite of himself, he was deeply

touched. "I'd never feel right about it. A bluff like this might fool the authorities——"

"Wait," Rocky pleaded. His face glistened with perspiration, and it was not altogether from the heat of the fire. "Just you set here and think it over. I'll go and tell the sarge that you're all set and in the clear. He don't have to hold you for Seattle now. But you just set and figure till he comes. You'll have eight minutes. Meanwhile, one quick drink."

He indicated Bill's cup, but Bill made no move. "You and I are square, old son. But you risked Ruth's life. You hurt her. She crawled along a ledge with her knees bleeding."

"Okay," Rocky said. "Two minutes more. Maybe it's worth it. . . . She's a good gal, Bill. If I hadn't roped you in Whitey'd have persuaded her to fly up to the lake alone, and he'd have come back alone. Think that over. Her knees will heal again. I was out of my depth with Whitey. I seen you in action with Red Schafer—and him wearing brass knuckles! When I seen you was sweet on her it was a natural."

"Sounds good," Bill said. "But weren't you also figuring in a little edge for Rocky Flynn?"

"It didn't work. It's taken me dang near a half century to find out that two things like that don't mix. When you figure to be a Santa Claus you got to go whole hawg or none. The way things broke up there at the lake, all I could do was gamble you'd make it through—and then lay Whitey by the heels. Cutting

my own throat, meanwhile. Think it over. I was in the clear when me and Whitey left the lake. You needed a little luck, of course. Who doesn't?"

He indicated Bill's cup. "Wet your whistle. . . . No, don't get up."

Bill came to his feet with a tremendous effort, nevertheless. Rocky was a salesman: the moment *bad* drama. There was some truth in his lines, at that. Joel Weatherby had stated it simply: "You're here. The gal's safe at Campana's."

Rocky raised his cup.

"It was a long haul," he said, blinking. "But I made it. Sleep sound, Hod. Where there ain't any frost and the wind don't blow."

The wind was sweeping across the roof. Bill barely moistened his lips, then set his cup down and seated himself heavily. Rocky drank deep, coughed, stamped on the floor, and pulled the hood of his parka forward.

"Thanks for your offer," Bill said, yawning. "You meant all right. Give my regards to that squaw up on the Dease. A good trapper and wood splitter, wasn't she?"

"Shush," said Rocky, nodding. "Name of Luna. But I'm heading across Sifton Pass. Remember that." He sidled toward the door. "Give that affydvait to the sarge, Bill. Remember now. Even if you tell him you think it's phony."

"Okay," Bill said.

"So long, son," said Rocky from the door.

"Luck," Bill said.

Rocky went out the front door, and almost immediately Samson Crim entered from the back. He peered about him, sidling over toward the fireplace. "Ain't Rocky here?"

"He said he was going over to the store," Bill told him with a gloomy twinkle.

There was the sound of a dog team getting under way: muffled snarlings, low-toned commands. Sled runners creaked, dwindled. It was hard to tell in the wind, but the direction seemed to be north.

"That's funny," Crim said. "It sounded like somebody pulling out. It couldn't be. Mine's the only real dog team in camp, and you heard me putting them away." He beamed guardedly at Bill. With his parka hood pushed back, he looked more than ever like a benevolent turtle. "Well, I'll get over to the store."

Bill was sitting there, staring at the fire, when Sergeant Henshaw and the trooper burst in. "Where's Flynn?"

Bill yawned. "Isn't he over at the store? He left here all of six minutes ago."

Both officers dashed out through the rear door. The sergeant's angry voice rose. "He's gone—with Crim's dogs! Rout out the camp! We'll start after him at once."

The sergeant strode back alone, his face grim and forbidding. "I hope you're not a party to this, Kennedy."

Bill blinked at him. "He made a run for it?"

"And somebody," the sergeant assured him, "will sweat for it."

"Maybe this will shed some light on it," Bill said, extending Rocky's affidavit.

Henshaw snatched the paper and read it. He read it again, nodding. "Well!" he said. "This is better, I must say. Even though the rascal made a run for it." He inserted the letter in a leather folder. "We'll round him up, of course. This clears you, Kennedy."

"No," Bill said heavily. "That confession doesn't mean a thing."

"On the contrary," Henshaw said, crossing to the front door. "It fits in precisely with our advices from Seattle."

The camp was in a joyous turmoil. Men dashed here and there, shouting like boys at a circus. They pursued dogs up the street and back again. They collided with each other, fell sprawling in their alleged excitement.

A blind man could have seen through this synthetic bedlam. Henshaw stood at the door, cursing softly and with futile emphasis. The trooper dashed up.

"They're stalling, Sergeant. It'll take them an hour to get under way. He has the best dogs. They claim there isn't another trained team in camp."

"Call them off," the sergeant snapped. "Tell them to assemble here at once." He backed into the room, glancing at his wrist watch. "My word—I'll never live this down! I should have kept the man in irons."

As for you, Kennedy, I can't understand why——"

"Wait," Bill said. He was up, leaning heavily on the table. "What d'you mean—it fits in with advices from Seattle?"

"Precisely that, sir. They've gathered evidence on the exact manner in which Schafer was murdered. This confession substantiates it in every particular." The sergeant looked keenly into his face. "Sit down, man." He spoke in a more kindly vein. "It's all right. In your condition you couldn't have stopped Flynn, in any case. I realize he was a friend of your father's, and all that. It's this blighted camp that took me in completely. Sit down, sir."

Bill did so, his head swimming.

"Sergeant," he said, "be patient with me. Just for a minute. What evidence? How was Schafer killed?"

Old-timers were crowding in, puffing and innocent-eyed. Henshaw scowled at them, leaning over Bill.

"The complete file's at Prince Rupert," he said. "I remember the major points. Their first request was to hold you for investigation. Then a second, more detailed report came. It seems that some friend of yours, a manager, I believe, of some prominent hotel——"

"The Denby," Bill said. "Old Sam Packard."

"That's the name—Packard. Packard found some discrepancy between the story you told him and the police theory. You had told him that you struck Schafer with your fist, knocking him down, and that Schafer's head struck the wall, killing him. But Schafer's skull was

fractured in the frontal area by a blunt instrument. They found the instrument in some junk yard near by, where Flynn had obviously tossed it. A short length of pipe. . . . Very well, gentlemen." He turned on the crowd. "Shut the door, please."

Bill heard the discussion only vaguely. The sergeant accused them of obstructing the law. They denied it in mass and in detail, loudly. Weatherby admitted that Rocky had asked about the trail to Sifton Pass, whether there'd been any snowslides beyond the big bend. He, Weatherby, had thought Rocky merely to be in reminiscent mood.

Schafer's hat had been over his face as he lay there in the alley, Bill recalled. While the police had been taking notes. His skull could have been crushed in front. Rocky *had* suggested, before the fight started: "There's some short lengths of pipe over in that junk. Best slip one into your pocket for percentage." And he, Bill, had said airily: "Oh no, Rocky. We're gentlemen."

Sergeant Henshaw said: "Sifton Pass, eh? That means he'll be over in the Mackenzie before we can head him off. The Mounted Police want him there. I'll inform them at once."

Good lord—bad Rocky actually killed Schafer?

He was alone in the cabin. Alone, that is, except for Crim and Weatherby tiptoeing around. Crim was hanging up his parka.

"Lookit," Weatherby whispered fiercely. "He stole my parka. With the wolverine on it. I paid that squaw seventy bucks!"

"He figured it in," Crim returned. "At a hundred even. Seven hundred for the outfit, including the dogs. He paid his way."

"On the line," Weatherby agreed, mollified. "The way I get it, though, ain't the rest of it the lad's money? Didn't this guy Schafer steal it from Hod?"

"Shush," said Crim. "Wait till he wakes up."

An airplane motor was thundering in the night. Bill said, running his fingers through his hair: "I'm not asleep. I've just been thinking. Where's that plane going?"

The two old-timers came over and leaned restfully against the fireplace.

"That there plane," said Crim, "is just taking off for Prince Rupert."

"But what about me? And Ruth?"

"I wouldn't know. Most folks would figure that was your business. . . . Oh, you mean how do you get down to Prince Rupert tomorrow? They're sending a plane after you."

"And what about Rocky?"

Crim pondered this. "What about Rocky? Well, the sergeant's going to radio over to the Mounties on the Mackenzie side to watch out for Rocky at Sifton Pass. But the sarge knows that Rocky won't make it to the

Pass till tomorrow night. So he'll fly up there tomorrow and set down at the Pass, waiting for Rocky."

"Only Rocky won't be there?"

"The sarge could take some eggs with him," Crim said. "He could keep them warm. Before Rocky shows up they'd ought to be hatched."

"But won't they keep after him till they catch him?"

The two old-timers looked at each other, and Crim nodded. "Take it away, Mr. Weatherby."

"You can't catch a man who ain't amongst us any more," Weatherby said. "The sarge'll backtrack afoot. He'll come to the dog team and a hole in the ice. There'll be a note saying Rocky had done give up. You can't drag a deep hole like that till spring. If you don't find nothing, what does that prove?" He blinked at Bill. "Rocky mentioned where he got that idea. It's slipped my mind for the minute, but it's good."

The plane roared up through the night, the echoes rolling and rumbling in the mountains. The sound of it circled overhead, dwindled, and was presently gone.

"Look," Bill said. "I'm not very bright. I've been kicked around a lot the last few days. Just answer one question straight. Do you believe—honestly—that Rocky killed Schafer?"

They looked at each other again, and both shrugged, palms outward.

"This is downright pitiful, Mr. Crim," said Weatherby. "The guy flatters himself, claiming he isn't too bright. He's nuts. Rocky's admitted he killed Schafer,

using a short length of pipe for the purpose. Them Seattle sleuths have even found the pipe, with red hair still clinging to it. Rocky could have faded without saying a word to anyone. But no; he had a debt. There was interest on it, and he tossed in the interest too. So how did he pay 'er, after first settling his haywire crown of glory into place firmly?"

"On the line."

"On the line, Mr. Crim. And now comes the plumb ruinous spectacle. This Bodine pilgrim's in the clink and will rot there. The gal's safe and sound, pounding her ear over at Campana's. This camp's had a circus that'll keep us palavering for weeks to come. Everybody's satisfied but this guy. He ain't accused of nothing. He's free as air. Still he sits there——"

"No, he ain't, Mr. Weatherby. Look—he's getting up."

Bill was up and did not grip the table for support. It was somebody else who was beaten and weary. Somewhere else there was loneliness and tears. Not here on the east fork. Not Bill Kennedy. . . .

"He *has* waked up," Crim whispered. "Lookit—his face is shining."

"Why not?" said Weatherby. "Hod had red whiskers too. Use Campana's razor on 'em, boy. The strop's hanging back of the door on the stoop."

Bill gripped their hands, and their expressionless masks fell. Crim's features split in an affectionate turtle grin. Weatherby showed wolfish fangs. "Hold on, Mr.

Crim—there's still a thousand bucks in that roll. John Law figures Rocky's got it. Fork it over to this young feller-me-lad."

"Keep it," said Bill. "You boys have earned it. Set 'em up for the camp. Drink to some of the old-timers who aren't here tonight."

He peered about him, looking for his helmet. "Hod Kennedy, for example. Who else?"

"Rocky Flynn," said Weatherby.

"It shall be done," said Crim.

Bill found his helmet on the table and put it on. He buttoned his jacket and drew on his gloves. He knew, none better, how cold was the wind that blew across the flats.

"I'll be over after you all tomorrow," said Crim, following him to the door. "No use having the gal fighting the drifts again. I'll fetch a dog team."

"Is there a dog team in camp?" Bill asked.

"Sure. Half a dozen of 'em. Around noon, maybe?"

Bill nodded. "If it's clear. If it's storming the plane won't be here, anyway, so just let it blow. . . . Good night, boys."

It was clear enough out on the flats. The moonlight was bright on the snow, and the stars flamed. Far above the dark timber and the thinning clouds was the glinting silhouette of the Rockies. Bill looked up at the peaks smilingly, almost with affection, as he leaned into the wind. One learned to understand mountains.

